An eminent Oxford philosopher, acclaimed for his defence of freedom and responsibility and of a conception of ourselves as fundamentally embodied beings, has a precocious son. Gripped by puzzles of infinity and death from the age of four, the son wins up teaching philosophy at Oxford. What is he famous for? His philosophy at Oxford. What is he famous for? His work at Oxford. What is he famous for? His attack on the possibility of freedom and his insistence that introspection yields a sense of oneself as something distinct from the human being that bears one’s name. His most notorious thesis: that it is no part of living well to find a coherent narrative in one’s life.

The intellectual biography of Galen Strawson, whose father, P. F. Strawson, was the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy, has a bit more to it. He took a detour through Islamic Studies to teach at the University of Texas; and he is equally known for his revisionary interpretation of David Hume and for advocating a “panpsychist” thesis that conscious experience is intrinsic to everything. But the caricature is not far from the mark. In Things That Bother Me, Strawson presents essays on narrative, free will, the sense of self, the nature of consciousness, and death, all written for a general audience. The essays are consistently personable, enjoyable and thought-provoking, with an enlightening range of literary reference. They are a model of how to write philosophy for non-philosophers, though philosophers will want to read them too.

For me, the most compelling theme is narrativity. Strawson dissects what he calls “a falacy of our age”, finding two fallacies confused: that we are prone to dictate our lives to ourselves in narrative form and that “a richly narrative outlook on one’s life is a good thing, essential to living well.” He protests on behalf of those, like himself, who have no interest in narrating their lives, yet seem as vital, fulfilled and morally decent as anyone else. “I don’t think everyone stories themselves”, he writes, “and I don’t think it’s always a good thing.”

What begins as a plea for psychological diversity ends up rather grudging to its narrativist foils: they are “really just talking about themselves” and while self-narration “may be the best ethical project that people like them can hope to engage in”, it is one that “the best lives almost never involve”. As Strawson admits, however, he is not quite sure what it would mean to live one’s life narratively, so the object of his scepticism is obscure. What is involved in the psychological conjecture, nicely verbed by Strawson, that we story ourselves?

It cannot just mean that we make plans and act in ways that are intelligible to us in light of them. That would trivialize the view. It is equally inadequate to say that we aspire to understand ourselves. Why must that involve narrative, as opposed to knowledge of one’s character, one’s values, or one’s social role? To live a narrative must be more than this. Your self-understanding must draw on the history that made you who you are. There must be enough consistency and connection in what you are doing and experiencing over time for patterns of intelligibility to extend through signatures and their offspring, in such a way that together as chapters in a unified tale. The relationship between the events of chapter one, youth, and those of chapter five, middle age, must be more than causal or consecutive: the events should have sense as a thematic sequel to the first, not an unrelated episode in what happens to be the life of a single human being. At least, that is how you must try to represent yourself.

If this is what makes for self-narration, why should it belong to a life well lived? Strawson hardly stops to ask, impatient to argue that it doesn’t. But the question is worth pressing, only to echo his perplexity. Much of what we value in narrative will be hard to exploit in narratives of ourselves: dramatic irony, opacity, polyphony, the unexpected twist. Self-narrative threatens to be pedestrian, limited and linear, its satisfactions merely those of making sense. “Not equipped with a novelist’s tools to create plots and maneuver pacing, to speak ominously or abandon an inconvenient character, you must invent the linearity and splice the less connected moments,” writes the novelist Yiyun Li in a recent memoir of depression, “the most interesting people among us, I often suspect, are flatter than the flatterest characters in a novel.”

When you make a narrative of your life, do you look backwards or forwards? Do you tell the story of your life so far, how you came to be this person in this place and time? Or do you proclaim what is to come, aiming to enact a future past? The latter seems oddly egoistic, an exercise in self-involved prolepsis, living for the “answer is easy. Anyone who has ever seen a film, a novel, a drama, has a tale in their head, a frame, a bed” in which the stream of consciousness is being conceived. What is it that conscious experience or to say that it merely conscious experience? It is absurd to deny the reality of conscious experience, but to leave this question open is not to answer it at Strawton does. When he writes that “the self is obviously thought of as distinct from the human being considered as a whole”, it is not obvious to me.

In answer to the question of how does Strawson respond to his own life and how does he write about his own life? Strawton’s incredulity peaks in the most acerbic essay in the book, “The Silliest Claim”, which derides philosophers who, according to Strawson, deny the reality of conscious experience. You may doubt that there can be such phi- losophers, but Strawton names names, including Daniel Dennett and Richard Rorty. They may deny their denial, but Strawton helpfully informs them that they are self-deceived. When they claim to save the reality of consciousness by explaining it in other terms, a programme of reduction not elimination, Strawson compares them to proponents of the pizzazz theory of consciousness, on which consciousness is really just a form of pizza and its theory, and you believe in pizza, you can say that you believe in consciousness; but you are fooling no one.

You may doubt that matters can be so simple. There must be some subtlety in how consciousness is being conceived. What is it that the deniers are apt to deny? For Strawson, the “answer is easy. Anyone who has ever come across anything which Strawron claims that instant, painless, unforeseen annihilation is no worse for you than continuing to exist. When he asks himself whether he’d rather be dead or alive tomorrow morning, he finds that he has no preference either way and he argues that you should be the same.

It is tempting to draw lines between Straw- son’s transience, his rejection of ultimate responsibility, his distinctive attitude to death and his panpsychism: to make a narrative of the chapters of this book. Strawson ignores or frustrates that temptation. He begins with a fear of death that is untouched by the conviction that he would lose nothing if he died. He ends with an autobiographical essay that takes us from the age of fifteen to twenty or twenty-one. The essay starts in Strawson’s schooldays before shivering into fragments: taking LSD, travelling from Turkey to Iran, living to Bob Dylan and to Berg’s Lyric Suite, filling a blue Mini with beer leaves. The writing is sparse but eloquent, emotionally honest, bright with sensation. What do these episodes have to do with one another? In the midst of beauty, it feels unimportant to ask.

KIERAN SETIYA

THINGS THAT BOTHER ME


Your self-understanding must draw on the history that made you who you are. There must be enough consistency and connection in what you are doing and experiencing over time for patterns of intelligibility to extend through signatures and their offspring, in such a way that together as chapters in a unified tale. The relationship between the events of chapter one, youth, and those of chapter five, middle age, must be more than causal or consecutive: the events should have sense as a thematic sequel to the first, not an unrelated episode in what happens to be the life of a single human being. At least, that is how you must try to represent yourself.

If this is what makes for self-narration, why should it belong to a life well lived? Strawton hardly stops to ask, impatient to argue that it doesn’t. But the question is worth pressing, only to echo his perplexity. Much of what we value in narrative will be hard to exploit in narratives of ourselves: dramatic irony, opacity, polyphony, the unexpected twist. Self-narrative threatens to be pedestrian, limited and linear, its satisfactions merely those of making sense. “Not equipped with a novelist’s tools to create plots and maneuver pacing, to speak ominously or abandon an inconvenient character, you must invent the linearity and splice the less connected moments,” writes the novelist Yiyun Li in a recent memoir of depression, “the most interesting people among us, I often suspect, are flatter than the flatterest characters in a novel.”

When you make a narrative of your life, do you look backwards or forwards? Do you tell the story of your life so far, how you came to be this person in this place and time? Or do you proclaim what is to come, aiming to enact a future past? The latter seems oddly egoistic, an exercise in self-involved prolepsis, living for the “answer is easy. Anyone who has ever seen a film, a novel, a drama, has a tale in their head, a frame, a bed” in which the stream of consciousness is being conceived. What is it that conscious experience or to say that it merely conscious experience? It is absurd to deny the reality of conscious experience, but to leave this question open is not to answer it at Strawton does. When he writes that “the self is obviously thought of as distinct from the human being considered as a whole”, it is not obvious to me.

In answer to the question of how does Strawson respond to his own life and how does he write about his own life? Strawton’s incredulity peaks in the most acerbic essay in the book, “The Silliest Claim”, which derides philosophers who, according to Strawson, deny the reality of conscious experience. You may doubt that there can be such phi- losophers, but Strawton names names, including Daniel Dennett and Richard Rorty. They may deny their denial, but Strawton helpfully informs them that they are self-deceived. When they claim to save the reality of consciousness by explaining it in other terms, a programme of reduction not elimination, Strawson compares them to proponents of the pizzazz theory of consciousness, on which consciousness is really just a form of pizza and its theory, and you believe in pizza, you can say that you believe in consciousness; but you are fooling no one.

You may doubt that matters can be so simple. There must be some subtlety in how consciousness is being conceived. What is it that the deniers are apt to deny? For Strawson, the “answer is easy. Anyone who has ever come across anything which Strawron claims that instant, painless, unforeseen annihilation is no worse for you than continuing to exist. When he asks himself whether he’d rather be dead or alive tomorrow morning, he finds that he has no preference either way and he argues that you should be the same.

It is tempting to draw lines between Straw- son’s transience, his rejection of ultimate responsibility, his distinctive attitude to death and his panpsychism: to make a narrative of the chapters of this book. Strawson ignores or frustrates that temptation. He begins with a fear of death that is untouched by the conviction that he would lose nothing if he died. He ends with an autobiographical essay that takes us from the age of fifteen to twenty or twenty-one. The essay starts in Strawson’s schooldays before shivering into fragments: taking LSD, travelling from Turkey to Iran, living to Bob Dylan and to Berg’s Lyric Suite, filling a blue Mini with beer leaves. The writing is sparse but eloquent, emotionally honest, bright with sensation. What do these episodes have to do with one another? In the midst of beauty, it feels unimportant to ask.