

6-21-2012

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### Recommended Citation

Lane, Andrew (2011) "The Narrative Self-Constitution View: Why Marya Schechtman Cannot Require it for Personhood," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol20/iss1/6>

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# THE NARRATIVE SELF-CONSTITUTION VIEW: WHY MARYA SCHECHTMAN CANNOT REQUIRE IT FOR PERSONHOOD

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*Andrew S. Lane*

**Abstract** In her book *The Constitution of Selves*, Marya Schechtman names four features essential for personal existence: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation. She rejects reductionists theories of persons, specifically that of Derek Parfit, claiming that they cannot support the four features. Instead, she proposes a theory of persons which she calls the Narrative Self-Constitution View. Because she believes this is required to support the four features, she also argues that for an individual to be a person they must hold this view. Drawing from the work of Derek Parfit and Galen Strawson, I will argue that her arguments are inconsistent and do not show that reductionist theories cannot support the four features. As a result, I conclude that Schechtman is wrong to require the Narrative Self-Constitution View for personhood.

This paper will deal with the theory of personal identity proposed by Marya Schechtman in her book, *The Constitution of Selves*.<sup>1</sup> In this work, Schechtman claims that there are four basic features of personal existence: survival, moral responsibility, self-

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<sup>1</sup> Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

interested concern, and compensation.<sup>2</sup> These she abbreviates as the “four features.” Regardless of potential additions or emendations to the list, I will not question these features. As far back as John Locke, accounting for moral responsibility is a key motivation for personal identity theory and this continues with more contemporary philosophers like Derek Parfit. Moral accountability seems required for a functional society. If a person at time  $T_1$  does not survive and there is a new person at time  $T_2$ , generally our intuition is that the person existing at time  $T_2$  would not be responsible for the actions of person existing at time  $T_1$ . Thus, it seems necessary that a person must survive across time to some extent, otherwise nobody could be held accountable for past actions. The work of Galen Strawson will be useful in considering this question of moral accountability. Self-interested concern and compensation also seem necessary for “personal” existence, though not for “impersonal” existence. It is not of necessity that the former is better than the latter, but this essay will set such considerations aside. I will take personal survival to be a valid target, which is Schechtman's aim, without justifying whether or not it is any better than impersonal survival. Schechtman believes that Reductionist views, like that of Derek Parfit, cannot capture the four features, and thus fail as accounts of personal identity. Instead, she advocates what she calls the Narrative Self-Constitution View, which she feels is required in order to capture the four features.

The Narrative Self-Constitution View holds that a person creates his or her identity by forming an autobiographical

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<sup>2</sup> Schechtman, *Constitution*, 2.

narrative. According to this view,

the difference between persons and other individuals...lies in how they organize their experience, and hence their lives. At the core of this view is the assertion that individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs. Some, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons.<sup>3</sup>

Those who do not adhere to this narrative view, those who do not think of themselves as persisting subjects and construct narratives, are not persons according to Schechtman. I claim, however, that the narrative self-constitution view is not the only way to capture the four features. As a result, Schechtman is wrong to deny personhood to individuals who do not view themselves narratively. The motivation for her requirement that an individual view themselves narratively is that to account for personal existence, we need to capture the four features; thus, if we can capture the four features another way, while this does not exclude her narrative view as one of the potential ways, which I believe it is, it is not required, and thus individuals who are non-narrative should not be excluded from personhood.

### **The Reductionist View of Derek Parfit**

Before considering the views of Derek Parfit, it will be

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<sup>3</sup> Schechtman, *Constitution*, 94.

useful to establish some distinctions concerning identity. First, there is the distinction between numerical and qualitative identity. For example, take two sheets of printer paper. The two sheets are qualitatively identical, for they share the same qualities, but are not numerically identical, because they are two different physical objects. While the two sheets are not numerically identical with each other, each is numerically identical with itself; each is one and the same sheet of paper. This is one of the basic principles of logic: self-identity.

Second, there is strict and non-strict identity. Strict identity requires that  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  be exactly the same in all ways; the smallest change of any kind destroys the strict identity of the objects. With non-strict identity, however, some change is permitted without destroying the non-strict identity of the objects. With the paper example,  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  are not strictly qualitatively identical, because if we compare closely enough, the fragments of pulp are not arranged in exactly the same configuration. Strict identity in this case would require that all the atoms making up the paper, and their arrangement, be exactly qualitatively identical. However,  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  may be considered non-strictly identical. For most purposes, it would be more useful to a person to consider  $X_1$  and  $X_2$  (non-strictly) qualitatively identical, because what matters to us about the sheets of paper is not on the level of atoms; for our purposes the sheets are qualitatively identical. The criteria for what qualifies for non-strict identity will vary depending on the objects in question, and this will be dependent on the perspective of who is considering the objects and their purposes. The strict/non-strict distinction applies to numerical identity as well. With the problem of personal identity, the two objects in question will be in different

temporal locations. To say that the paper is self-identical in a given moment considers space, while the time aspect is constant. When considering whether the paper is numerically identical at different moments also considers time. Strictly, the paper would not be identical at different moments because the atomic makeup will have slightly changed, for example from the effects of light. However, we may say that they are non-strictly identical if all that has changed are the atomic differences from light, because these differences are irrelevant to what matters to us about paper.

One of Parfit's central concerns is moral accountability. As mentioned in the introduction, if a person at time  $T_1$  is not the same person at time  $T_2$ , then it seems that the person at time  $T_2$  could not be held accountable for the actions of the person at time  $T_1$ , for they are not the same person. When we look at an individual across time, they are never strictly identical at two different times. Atoms have changed and psychological makeup is in constant flux. Thus, when speaking of an individual at two different times, they are never strictly-identical on a reductionist account. If one holds that there is, as Parfit would say, a further fact of identity, then one may argue that there can be strict identity across time. If, for example, there were an immaterial, eternal substance, perhaps a soul, and this substance provides identity, then it may be strict identity. None of the philosophers discussed in this essay argue for such a substance, and because it is not within the scope of this paper to properly argue against it, I will set this possibility aside. The person at two different times may, however, be non-strictly identical. The question then becomes, what criteria should we use to decide whether or not they are (non-strictly) identical? For Parfit, the mind is more important than the body and thus seems

the natural place to locate this identity. As a result, he articulates psychological criteria for identity.

For this, Parfit defines three terms: psychological connectedness, strong psychological connectedness, and psychological continuity. Psychological connectedness is “the holding of particular direct psychological connections.”<sup>4</sup> Parfit cites memories, beliefs, desires and intentions as examples of individual psychological connections. For example, if a person at age 18 has the memory of running from a dog when they were younger, and this person still has this memory when they are 20, this would be an example of a direct psychological connection. Parfit claims, “since connectedness is a matter of degree, we cannot plausibly define precisely what counts as enough. But we can claim that there is enough connectedness if the number of direct connections, over any day, is at least half the number that hold, over every day, in the lives of nearly every actual person.”<sup>5</sup> Strong connectedness means over half of the possible psychological connections hold. Strong connectedness is not transitive. A person at time  $T_1$  may be strongly connected to the person at time  $T_2$ , and the person at time  $T_2$  to the person at time  $T_3$ , but it does not follow that the person at time  $T_3$  is strongly connected to the person at time  $T_1$ . Psychological continuity is “the holding of overlapping chains of *strong* connectedness.”<sup>6</sup> While strong connectedness is not a transitive relation, psychological continuity is. Thus, the person at time  $T_3$  would be psychologically

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<sup>4</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford, Oxfordshire: Clarendon Press, 1984), 206.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

continuous with the person at time  $T_1$ , because they are linked through time  $T_2$  to which they are both strongly connected. A person at two different times may be considered (non-strictly) identical if and only if they are psychologically continuous. Like the Buddhists and David Hume, Parfit claims that there is no Self, where the Self would be an unchanging entity or essence that can provide identity for an individual across time. That is, there is no “further fact” of identity; identity simply consists in holding psychological continuity.

### **The Extreme Claim and the Moderate Claim**

In his book *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit claims that we are Selfless persons, that there is no Self to provide the further fact of identity, instead claiming that our identity simply consists in overlapping chains of strong psychological connections, but thinks that this is not such a terrible thing. In fact, he feels that adopting this view was a positive change in his life. In response to his view, however, he sees two possible reactions; one he calls the Extreme Claim, the other the Moderate Claim.

The Extreme Claim says that “if the Reductionist view is true, we have *no* reason to be concerned about our own futures.”<sup>7</sup> If in the future, my future self will not be the same person as my current self, then I have no reason to care for this person. It is not me. For example, why should I care if smoking damages my body, for it will not be me who dies of cancer. The Moderate Claim, however, says that psychological continuity with a high degree of connectedness gives us a reason to be concerned for our future

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 307.

selves.<sup>8</sup> Parfit believes that even though it will not be the same person in the future by strict criteria, it could be the same person on a reductionist account, and the present person may still have concern for the future person. He likens this to how we may be concerned for our children, even if they are not us. The relations that justify this are not a deep separate fact. If these relations give us reason to care, then psychological continuity may give us reason.

However, one may still object that it will not be one in the future, so why should one be especially concerned today about what one shall care about in the future? Why should a person care about either their future selves or other people's future selves? To this, Parfit says that he does not have an argument to completely refute the extreme claim. Both claims, he thinks, are defensible. Though, he believes that we are not forced to accept the extreme claim. He wonders,

It may be wrong to compare our concern about our own future with our concern for those we love. Suppose I learn that someone I love will soon suffer great pain. I shall be greatly distressed by this news. I might be *more* distressed than I would be if I learnt that *I* shall soon suffer such pain. But this concern has a different quality. I do not *anticipate* the pain that will be felt by someone I love.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, because he cannot refute the Extreme Claim, he accepts it as a defensible response to his position. However, he maintains that

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 312.

the Moderate Claim is also defensible. Neither claim, he thinks, necessarily follows from his theory. Which claim a person holds will depend on the feeling of that person.

### **Schechtman's Argument from the Extreme Claim**

Schechtman believes that reductionism cannot support the Moderate Claim and as a result we are forced to accept the Extreme Claim. Because the Extreme Claim cannot support the Four Features, Reductionism, she claims, cannot be true. She maintains that instead of accepting this as an interesting result of Parfit's theory of personal identity, it should be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Parfit's reductionist account, because it cannot support the four features.<sup>10</sup> Her argument has two premises. Premise 1 is that “the four features require numerical identity—qualitative similarity will not do.”<sup>11</sup> This is because “self-interested concern is an emotion that is appropriately felt only toward my own self and not toward someone like me. We all know the difference between fearing for our own pain and fearing for the pain of someone else.”<sup>12</sup> As Parfit himself recognized, this is a difference of kind and not of degree. While we may potentially care about another person's pain more than our own, we do not “anticipate” the pain. Premise 2 claims that “the psychological continuity theory collapses the distinction between someone *being* me and someone being *like* me—that all identity amounts to on this view is psychological similarity between distinct individuals.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Schechtman, *Constitution*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

Schechtman believes that the extreme claim follows from these premises. If there is no difference between being the same person, and being like a different person, how can we decide if it is the same person, and thus how could we consider them to have self-interested concern? If qualitative similarity between distinct individuals is insufficient to underlie the four features, then the continuity theory fails to account for the importance of identity. She believes that to avoid the Extreme Claim, we need a theory where one and the same experiencing subject can exist at two different times; if person-stages are the only subjects that have experience in the theory, and person stages are not of the same subject, then this cannot happen.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Tribal Example**

Regardless of the Extreme Claim, Parfit insists that, even though his rejection of the Non-Reductionist view led him to be less concerned about his future, he was still more concerned about his own future than that of a mere stranger.<sup>15</sup> To account for this concern, and to counter Schechtman's argument that we are forced to accept the Extreme Claim, we need to deal with the problem of anticipation. The Narrative Self-Constitution view, I argue, does no better than reductionism on this account. We also need to show that this concern is of a different character than the concern for others, because otherwise she can simply claim that it is not self-interested concern and thus does not capture the four features. To approach this, let us look to an example that Schechtman herself uses while

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>15</sup> Parfit, *Reasons*, 308.

defending her demand for a conventional linear narrative against the claim of chauvinism: the “Tribal” example.

At some point, the deviation of an individual's self-conception from the range of narratives standard in our culture can be so great that comprehension of and interaction with such individuals becomes difficult. This is the sort of divergence that can often be found in cases of extreme cultural difference. In such a case the narrative self-constitution view might recognize that this culture has persons, but also note that their concept of persons—and so the persons themselves—are quite different from in our culture. For instance, a tribal culture might assign to an ancestral lineage much of the role that the individual person plays in our culture—responsibility, for instance, may be felt most directly for all of the actions of an ancestral line rather than for the actions of the individual alone, and self-interested and survival concerns may also be primarily attached the lineage. Presumably the members of this culture would also recognize what we call a single person as a natural unit, but this unit would play a different role in their interactions and practices.<sup>16</sup>

Schechtman would still consider these people, even though they have distinct selves spanning multiple bodies across multiple lifetimes. The person here, would thus involve the entire lineage, which she feels means that their concept of a person is different, but that they can still meet her criteria of supporting the four

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<sup>16</sup> Schechtman, *Constitution*, 104.

features. Schechtman does not deny that Parfit is correct that we are distinct selves at different times; rather, she feels that we need narrativity to connect these selves as a single subject in order to capture the four features. Although Schechtman uses this example to defend her theory, it may also be used to illuminate why we are not forced to accept the Extreme Claim.

### **Why We Are Not Forced to Accept the Extreme Claim**

We may now turn to Galen Strawson. He speaks of people as either episodic or diachronic. Someone who is diachronic sees themselves as existing across time and feels a deep connection to their past, whereas an episodic “has little or no sense that the self that one is was there in the (further) past and will be there in the future, although one is perfectly well aware that one has long-term continuity considered as a whole human being. Episodics are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms.”<sup>17</sup> Further, Galen Strawson thinks that “the heart of Moral responsibility, considered as a psychological phenomenon, is just a sort of instinctive *responsiveness* to things, a responsiveness in the present whose strength or weakness in particular individuals has nothing to do with how Episodic or Diachronic or Narrative or non-Narrative they are.”<sup>18</sup> For Strawson, moral responsibility does not depend on whether or not it was the same (transient) self in the past. He claims that he, the present self, feels responsibility for past

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<sup>17</sup> Galen Strawson, “Against Narrativity,” in *Ratio*. 17.4 (2004): 428-452. Rpt. in *The Self?* Ed. Galen Strawson, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2005), 65.

<sup>18</sup> Galen Strawson, “Episodic Ethics,” *Philosophy*. 82.320 (2007). Cambridge University Press. Rpt. in *Real Materialism and Other Essays*, Galen Strawson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 220.

actions that he, the present self, did not perform. While Strawson most identifies with the present self, which he claims is very short lived, he also recognizes that as a whole human being he exists across time. People may feel a sense of responsibility for the actions of their family members, or community, etc, even though they did not perform them. This is especially easy to see in the case of children. Parents often feel responsibility for the actions of their child, even though they are fully aware that the child is a distinct person. Strawson claims that in the case of responsibility, there is a “phenomenon of natural transmission” that does not require diachronic self-experience.<sup>19</sup> For example, when a person dies their family members often handle any obligations of the deceased that remain open, including debt, regardless of the fact that they are distinct persons. A person holds himself responsible when he feels this sense of responsibility, even if the present self is not the same self that committed the original action.

Parfit's theory considers a situation that is similar with his Nobel Prize Winner example. He writes, “Suppose that a man aged ninety, one of the few rightful holders of the Nobel Peace Prize, confesses that it was he who, at the age of twenty, injured a policeman in a drunken brawl. Though this was a serious crime, this man may not now deserve to be punished.”<sup>20</sup> When considering his accountability, we question his present state, whether and in what way he is similar to the person who did the action. In the case of the Nobel Prize winner, we look to see if the present self is similar in certain ways to the past self, and this is

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>20</sup> Parfit, *Reasons*, 326.

relevant to whether or not we hold him responsible. That they may be considered two different people does not preclude us from holding the present person responsible for the past person's actions. Does the present self, the Nobel Prize winner, still attack police officers? Or, does he still have psychological similarities that are relevant to this question? Is he peaceful, does he respect the police and other people in general, does he have a temper, are all relevant questions. Further, these questions affect whether or not he, the Nobel Prize winner, will feel responsible for this action.

Schechtman, however, maintains that qualitative similarity is not enough for responsibility, but this does not seem to be universally the case. We find examples where people feel a sense of responsibility even if they (the present self) did not perform the actions. While Schechtman accepts transference between living bodies in the Tribal example, within the life of a single human, this is not much different. There are multiple selves within the lifetime of one body instead of multiple lifetimes with multiple bodies; if anything, this should be easier for Schechtman to accept than the situation in the Tribal example. The difference is only one of distance and greater known qualitative similarity. In contrast to the above example, one may feel a much stronger sense of responsibility for an action they committed yesterday than for the actions of their ancestors. Here, they know a much greater amount of qualitative similarity holds, and feel themselves to be much more the same person. Even an episodic person may say this. In the case of the Nobel Prize winner, the qualitative similarity may be much weaker, and thus he may feel less responsible, for this is pushing closer to the situation of someone feeling responsible for an ancestor's actions as opposed to feeling responsible for the

actions of yesterday. While this is not the same as it would be if it were the same self, strictly speaking, feeling the responsibility as who did the action, the practical result is not different in a meaningful way; the responsibility, as a feeling, does not necessarily require that it be the same self as the self who did the action.

Schechtman allows that these tribal individuals are people, just different people. They feel responsibility for their ancestor's actions. Schechtman denies that we may feel responsibility for what we, the present self, did not do if we accept the reductionist view, but she will allow this if the conception of a person ranges across multiple bodies, presumably if they are conceptualized in the right way, with narrative. This allowance, however, can be turned around. If a tribal person is allowed to range across multiple bodies and lifetimes, even though Tribal body 1 will not feel the pain of their son, Tribal body 2, they may still have concern for it, and she must accept this in the tribal society for her theory to be coherent. In this case, one may speak of self-interested concern without anticipation, which is inconsistent with her argument for why we are forced to accept the Extreme Claim. She doesn't argue for why her theory allowing the tribal lineages to be people does not apply equally in the case of a single individual with multiple selves in our own society. She merely rejects this possible conception of a person out of hand. Moreover, she gives no argument to justify *her* particular choice for what it means to be a person in our own society. Having considered the views of Parfit and Strawson, it is clear that there are other options for what it means to be a person and these alternative conceptions cannot be ruled out just because they are different. It seems like she must

actually require that these tribal individuals are not people, for they cannot anticipate the actions as their own, or she must expand her concept of anticipation so that if the individual conceptualizes themselves in such a way that they have concern for future persons they take to be themselves (in the non-present self sense), this must be as acceptable as the anticipation she believes she establishes with her narrative self-constitution view. Otherwise, her example is meaningless, and she is open to the charge of chauvinism, for she has no good reason to exclude other possible self-conceptions. And thus, she is wrong to require her self-conception for personhood.

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