READING 23

Personal Identity and the Past

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Marya Schechtman was born in Chicago in 1960. She did her undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago, receiving her bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1982. She then enrolled in the graduate program in philosophy at Harvard University. Upon completing her doctorate in 1988 with a prize-winning dissertation, she accepted an appointment as assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). In 1995 Schechtman was promoted to associate professor and began a joint appointment with UIC's Laboratory for Integrative Neuroscience. Since 2004 she has served as associate dean of the Graduate College of UIC. She has held visiting positions at the University of Chicago (1994) and New York University (1996).

Schechtman has published articles on the philosophy of mind in journals such as *The Journal of Philosophy, American Philosophical Quarterly,* and *Philosophical Psychology* and *Social Philosophy and Policy.* She has contributed essays to several anthologies on topics in the philosophy of mind and is the author of *The Constitution of Selves* (1996).

Our reading is from Schechtman's 2005 article "Personal Identity and the Past," in which she proposes a development of the theory of personal identity set forth by English philosopher John Locke in the 17th century. Locke maintains that what makes someone the same person over time is not some physical substance (body) or nonphysical substance (soul), but the continuity of consciousness: "Personal identity consists . . . in the identity of consciousness." Locke seems to be saying that one's *conscious memory* of past actions and experiences is what makes these actions and experiences one's own. This theory leads to the conclusion that past actions and experiences that persons do not consciously remember do not belong to them. Because this conclusion is highly implausible, Locke's theory needs to be modified.

Schechtman agrees with Locke the personal identity is not to be found in the continuity of substance. Some theorists, she explains, try to fix Locke's account of personal identity by stating that psychological continuity requires that we have access to a *sufficient number* of memories to connect us to a past time. Schechtman contends that this additional requirement still fails to give adequate explanation of personhood because it says nothing about the *intelligibility* of these memories. To remedy the problem, Schechtman proposes a "self-understanding view" of personhood. In this view, personal identity requires not only that we *remember* past events, but *understand* how they form part of a meaningful trajectory from our past, to our present, and into the future. Such an understanding "gives us our sense of continuation and coherence as a self, and so provides the kind of self-conception and relation to a particular past that constitutes personal identity." And because personal identity is affected not only by conscious memories (as Locke recognized), but by *unconscious* ones (which Locke failed to recognize), Schechtman's self-understanding theory of personal identity includes both conscious and unconscious memories.

[INTRODUCTION]

In the second edition of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* John Locke takes up the question of what makes someone the same person throughout her entire life.[1] His response to this question has served as the starting point for many of the views of personal identity represented in the philosophical literature today. Locke's important contribution is to argue that the continuation of a person is independent of the continuation of any substance—either physical (the body) or nonphysical (the soul). I am the same person as someone who existed in the past, says Locke, if and only if I can extend my current consciousness back to that person's actions. This assertion is usually interpreted as a "memory theory" of personal identity—the view that whatever actions and experiences a person can remember are, for that reason, her actions and experiences.

In some respects, Locke's view is extremely compelling, but at the same time a simple memory theory is totally implausible. Although Locke's arguments that continuation of substance cannot serve as a viable account of personal identity are powerful, a view that implies that a person can have no experiences that he does not (or cannot easily) remember consciously seems far too strong. Locke might or might not be willing to bite the bullet and accept that no forgotten experiences can be ours, but most philosophers are not. . . .

I propose a . . . development of Locke's insight that emphasizes the importance of self-understanding. This view captures most of what Locke says about why consciousness is so central to personhood and personal identity without being committed to the implausible view that only experiences of which we are conscious can be ours. I begin with a brief review of Locke's view. . . .

LOCKE'S ARGUMENT

Locke's central contribution to work on personal identity is his insistence that identity must be defined in terms of sameness of consciousness rather than sameness of substance. It is not the continuation of either an immaterial soul or a body that constitutes the continuation of the person, he says, but rather the continued flow of consciousness. There are two basic elements of his argument for this claim. To make the claim intuitively plausible, he uses a number of hypothetical cases in which continuation of consciousness is separated from continuation of substance, showing that our judgment in such cases would be that the person goes with the consciousness. He also provides a more theoretical discussion about what it is to be a person, arguing that once we understand this clearly we see that identity must be defined in terms of consciousness rather than substance. It is helpful to review briefly each aspect of his discussion.

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[1]John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* "Of Identity and Diversity," which first appeared as Book II, Chapter 27, of the 2nd edition (1694). All quotations from this chapter in this article are taken from the edition of Peter H. Nidditch (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 328–348. Locke (1632–1704) was an English philosopher. [D. C. ABEL]

Locke gets us to see the force of his view through the use of a series of imagined cases. He asks us to imagine, for instance, the mental life of a prince "entering and informing" the body of a cobbler, and argues that everyone would see that the resulting person is the same person as the prince rather than the cobbler. He suggests that we imagine someone who has the same soul as Nestor or Thersites at the siege of Troy, but without consciousness of any of their actions, and tells us that it is obvious that this person is no more the same person as Nestor or Thersites than he would be if his body happened to share some of the same matter that had once composed theirs. He asks us also to imagine a man who has two distinct consciousnesses sharing his body—one by day and one by night—with no communication between them, and says that it is clear that there are two distinct persons sharing one body in such a case.

This view of personal continuation is not, of course, uncontroversial. It is, however, widely accepted, and whether or not this is the final word on what it is to be a person, it undoubtedly captures one important strand of our thought about ourselves. The same basic intuition is expressed, for instance, by William James in *The Principles of Psychology* when he says:

> The soul, however, when closely scrutinized, guarantees no immortality of a sort *we care for.* The enjoyment of the atom-like simplicity of their substance *in saecula saeculorum*[2] would not to most people seem a consummation devoutly to be wished. The substance must give rise to a stream of consciousness continuous with the present stream, in order to arouse our hope, but of this the mere persistence of the substance per se[3] offers no guarantee.[4]

This idea can also be seen when we recognize that there is a real sense in which we would view total, irreversible amnesia as a form of death. Faced with the prospect of such amnesia we might well distribute remembrances, write letters to loved ones, and in other ways act as if we were anticipating death.

The Lockean insight is also seen in the impulse to view multiple personality disorder[5] as a circumstance in which more than one person share a body. Of course, describing this disorder in this way is by no means uncontroversial. . . . It is, I think, at least uncontroversial to claim that in multiple personality disorder we are not presented unproblematically with a single person. The fact that these cases seem to present, at least sometimes, genuinely independent streams of consciousness that may have no awareness of one another, seems reason enough to say that there is some very important sense in which distinct persons co-occupy a body just as Locke took his revolving day and night consciousness to do.

This, then, is the basic intuition behind Locke's view, and it is in many respects a familiar and compelling one. Locke further supports his account of identity by giving a more general definition of the concept of the person revealed in these cases. He tells us that *person* stands for "a thinking intelligent

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[2]*in saecula saeclorum:* (Latin, "for ages of ages") forever and ever. [D. C. ABEL]
[3]*per se:* (Latin) in itself. [D. C. ABEL]
[4]William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), 1:348. [M. SCHECHTMAN] James (1842–1910) was an American philosopher and psychologist. [D. C. ABEL]
[5]*multiple personality disorder:* also called *dissociative identity disorder.* [D. C. ABEL]

being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself the same thinking thing in different times and places." To be a person is to have self-consciousness, viewing oneself as a persisting subject. This means that a person becomes the same person who has past experiences or undertook past actions when her consciousness includes them. "As far as any intelligent being can repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action;" says Locke, "so far it is the same personal self." His view in a nutshell, then, is that "personal identity consists, not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of consciousness."

Locke expands on this concept of person by telling us that *person* is a "forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so belongs only to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery." This characterization sets out two features that Locke takes to be unique to personhood, and that he uses to support his definition of personal identity in terms of sameness of consciousness. First, persons are capable of a special sort of self-interested concern; and second, they are moral agents, capable of taking actions for which they can be held responsible. Both of these capacities, he argues, are linked to consciousness. To care about the unfolding of our lives, we need to have a conscious conception of ourselves as having a future to care about. Moreover, it is through consciousness that we experience pleasure and pain, and so the extent of our concern is the extent of our conscious experience. He puts it this way: "Self is that conscious thinking thing (whatever substance made up of, whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not) which is sensible[6] or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself as far as that consciousness extends."

He also argues that moral responsibility requires consciousness. To be moral agents, we must be able to plan and to recognize that actions we take now have consequences in the future. Here he taps the intuitions unearthed by the kinds of hypothetical cases described above. He says, for instance, "for suppose a man punished now for what he had done in another life, whereof he could be made to have no consciousness at all—what difference is there between that punishment and being created miserable?" Again the case of multiple personality disorder gives us a real-life example of what Locke has in mind here. Such cases have raised tricky questions in legal contexts about how to assign culpability when the consciousness of the personality who allegedly committed a crime is unavailable to other personalities in the same body.

Locke thus taps into a widely held concept of the person according to which a person is a self-conscious subject. On this picture, personal identity or continuation through time depends on the continuation of consciousness. In particular, if one is conscious of oneself as the same self who existed at some past time, this consciousness actually makes one the same person as that past self. The failure of such self-consciousness, on the other hand, signals the end of the person. Attempting to capture this conception of the person, Locke thus tells us that we become the same person as some past person by extending our consciousness

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[6]*sensible*: aware. [D. C. ABEL]

back to her experiences because in doing so we become aware not only of those experiences themselves, but of the fact that we are the ones who had them. This awareness gives us consciousness of ourselves as persisting beings, and so constitutes the fact of our identity with the past person—a fact that would not hold were we not conscious of her experiences.

Although there is undoubtedly something very compelling about Locke's view of personal identity, it is problematic as it stands. It is not entirely obvious just what the details of the view are, but it is generally read as a "memory theory"—the view that whatever experiences a person remembers are, for that reason, her experiences. . . .

A simple memory theory, however, is not plausible on its own. It is at the same time too weak and too strong. This theory is *too weak* because it seems that it takes more than simply remembering an experience to make me the person who did it. As many objectors have pointed out, memory is good evidence that a past experience is ours, but on its own it does not seem quite enough to make it ours. To use a variation on a science fiction case that appears often in the literature, the fact that a neurosurgeon may develop a technique whereby she could implant in my brain the recollection of an experience had by her grandmother does not now make me the person who had that experience (namely, her grandmother). The memory theory is *too strong* because even when we are thinking of ourselves as conscious subjects rather than substances, it seems obvious that we can and do forget experiences that are nonetheless ours. If the mind of the prince were, for example, to enter the body of the cobbler but along the way lose the memory of what the prince ate for breakfast or repress the memory of a rather unfortunate interaction with the vice chancellor, we would not want to deny that these were, nonetheless, experiences of the prince and so of the person inhabiting the cobbler's body. To provide a plausible account of identity, then, the simple memory theory needs some development. . . .

AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT

The task of developing the Lockean insight is . . . twofold. First, it is necessary to give an account of the kind of connection to the past that a person must have to develop the type of self-conception that constitutes personal identity. Second, it is necessary to give an account of the attribution of particular actions and experiences that allows for the attribution of unconscious elements as well as conscious ones. It is easiest to begin with the first task.

Locke tells us that we make ourselves selves, and so determine our identity, by forming a self-conscious conception of ourselves as persisting subjects. The exact nature of this self-conception is never really spelled out, however. In the hands of psychological continuity theorists, it becomes the requirement that we have a sufficient number of memories of past experiences to connect us to a past time. Undoubtedly, this is a very important part of how we come to have our self-conceptions, but as a full account, it is rather thin: All that is required to have the appropriate sort of self-conception—the kind that determines personal identity and continuation into the future—is to have knowledge of what some

collection of experiences is like from the inside. It is enough, on this view, just to have access to a certain number of memories. There is no further requirement on how these memories are to cohere or to be associated with present states.

The alternative development of the Lockean view I suggest adds to the recognition of the importance of memory and brute self-consciousness a recognition of the importance of being intelligible to ourselves. To have the kind of self-conception that constitutes personal identity on the view I am urging (call it the "self-understanding view"), one must not just know about some collection of past experiences and think of them as hers; she must see her life as unfolding according to an intelligible trajectory, where present states follow meaningfully from past ones, and the future is anticipated to bear certain predictable relations to the present. This does not mean that a person's life course is entirely under her control, only that she can see connections between how things were, how they are, and how they are likely to be. Having a self-conception does not just amount to knowing that one has a past and will have a future, but also involves seeing these as inherently interconnected and rich with implications for one another.

This understanding changes the fundamental nature of the self-awareness that constitutes us as persons. It is no longer a passive knowing that we have had experiences, but a more active attempt to make sense of those experiences and understand where they are leading us. Fully understood, Locke's fundamental insight is that as self-conscious entities we are interested in the character of our experience, and also in what we should do and what kind of person we should be. What this means, however, is that we are constantly self-monitoring, keeping track of how we are feeling, what we are doing, and what we are like. This self-monitoring is mostly implicit. There are many occasions where we introspect and consciously consider the trajectory of our lives and how its episodes fit together, but usually we are caught up in the activity of living, and this work goes on in the background. On the self-understanding view, it is this self-monitoring that gives us our sense of continuation and coherence as a self, and so provides the kind of self-conception and relation to a particular past that constitutes personal identity.

The basic picture of this self-monitoring is nicely developed by Raymond Martin in his book *Self-Concern*.[7] There Martin develops the notion of a "perceiver self." We experience the world, Martin says, as if one part of the self were split off from the flux of events as an observer, watching and recording the stream of our experience. Martin argues that the perceiver-self is an illusion, and of course in some sense it must be; there is no homuncular[8] entity within people who is the observer of their experience. Nevertheless, as Martin indicates, the sense that there is such a self is a robust and pervasive element of experience, and a central feature of human psychological organization. . . .

The "perceiver-self" then should be thought of as a stable observer who views and records the passing flux of experience and recognizes it as part of a

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[7]Raymond Martin, *Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). [M. SCHECHTMAN]

[8]*homuncular:* relating to a *homunculus*, a miniature human being postulated to exist inside human beings, as a way to explain psychological processes. [D . C. ABEL]

single life; it need not be an actually persisting agent, or even a truly continuous psychological process, but it is a process that gives rise to the background sense of a stable self of the sort whose existence seems crucial to personal identity on the view we have been exploring. My suggestion is that it is this sense of a stable perceiver-self, rather than a simple knowledge that one has had experiences in the past, that constitutes the continuation of consciousness that constitutes personal identity over time.

One way to make this rather abstract conception more concrete is to connect this self-monitoring to certain capacities. One quite simple implication of having such a self-conception is that a person can generally answer questions such as "Why do I feel this way?" or "Why am I doing this?," should they arise. If she cannot answer them, she should be motivated to look for an answer. Answers to questions of this sort usually involve a number of factors. If one cannot easily make sense of the way one is feeling or choosing to act, however, it is natural to look for external explanations, considering the environment carefully to see if there is some hitherto undetected factor that is exerting an influence. In this way one might notice that it is the gathering clouds outside that are making one gloomy or anxious, even if one had not noticed them before; or that one's mother is constantly sending off subtle signals of disapproval and that this can explain one's guilt.

Sometimes, however, scrutiny of our environment and of our conscious internal states still leaves us baffled about why we feel or act as we do. This unintelligibility threatens our integrity as self-conscious subjects—in the subject, as in the world more generally, there should be no events that are simply uncaused. This does not mean that we must fully understand all of our feelings or motives, but only that we should not be at a loss as to where to start in such self-understanding. This really would undermine the difference between punishment and being created miserable. If we are at a loss, and no overlooked external factors can be found, it is natural to look for occult internal causes—nonconscious memories or impulses. Descartes offers an early example of this strategy with respect to his perceptions in the course of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.[9] He recognizes that he had previously taken his perceptual images to come from external objects because he was not aware of bringing them about himself. In the context of the meditations, however, he is supposing that there are no external objects, and so wonders if the images might come instead from some unknown part of himself. Although he ultimately decides that they come from an external world via God, his reflections demonstrate nicely the kind of dynamic I have in mind—first, the basic idea that it is our responsibility not only to know the contents of our consciousness but to understand their origins; and second, the willingness to consider that we could, unknowingly, be the cause of our conscious experience. In a context more directly related to the current discussion, Freud's[10] "discovery" of the unconscious follows just this logic, and it is, of course, this insight that is the inspiration of the self-understanding view with its emphasis on the importance of being intelligible to ourselves.

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[9]René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Sixth Meditation (an excerpt on pp. 207–208 of this book). Descartes (1596–1650) was a French philosopher and mathematician; for a biography, see p. 144. [D. C. ABEL]

[10]Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian neurologist who founded psychoanalysis. [D. C. ABEL]

In postulating inner sources for our experiences and actions we recognize that there are parts of ourselves that we are not conscious of, but that are yet part of our psychological lives in an importantly intimate way. These experiences impact the nature of our conscious experience, and hence should be part of the purview of our self-interested concern. They also influence what we do and lead to experiences of guilt, shame, or pride, and so are connected to our moral agency. To have an identity-constituting self-conception, then, a person must demand (at least implicitly) a kind of coherence and intelligibility to the course of her life. The past should not only be remembered; it should help to explain the present, which in turn should help predict the future. To achieve this intelligibility, we often need to allow for the impact of psychological features and experiences of which we are not directly conscious. The suggestion is thus that the attribution of individual states should be on this basis. Those memories or desires or motivations whose existence, as part of the psychological economy, must be postulated to make sense of a person's experience or the course of her life will be considered her experiences. In this way, we can make room for the attributions of experiences that are nonconscious without violating the fundamental Lockean insight. These experiences still affect us along the dimension of pleasure and pain, and are still connected to our capacities for moral agency. They are part of what determines how our lives will unfold, and what our experience will be like.

The proposed alternative to the psychological continuity theory is thus a view that develops Locke's idea that to be a person is to understand oneself as a persisting being in terms of the demands we make that our lives be intelligible. To be a person on this view is implicitly to keep track of the unfolding of one's life. The particular type of self-concern that Locke takes to be definitive of personhood, as well as the capacity for moral agency, depends on our not just knowing ourselves to persist, but actively seeking to understand how our lives come to be pleasant or unpleasant, learning lessons from the past and applying them to the future. The stream of consciousness that we count as personal continuation involves understanding how the connections between past, present, and future work for us—not just seeing the present as connected to the past, but as flowing from it. This sometimes depends on the recognition of psychological states that play a role in determining our conscious experience, although they are not themselves conscious. It is important to understand that for such states to be attributed to a person, she need not consciously reflect on her history and accept their existence. This is worthy work and may be well worth undertaking for many reasons. For us to say of a person that a nonconscious experience is hers, however, all that is required is that it in fact be necessary to make her psychological life intelligible, whether she recognizes this fact or not.

There is a long-standing idea that memory plays a crucial role in the constitution of personal identity over time. This idea is tied to the Lockean insight about the importance of continuity of consciousness for personal identity. There is also a sense that a person can obviously have experiences she does not remember. This conflict of intuitions seems to be more than simply a conflict over whether persons are to be viewed as psychological subjects or substances. It is also internal to the view of persons as subjects. . . . An alternative

account—the self-understanding view—recognizes the original conflict as between intuitions that identify the psychological subject with conscious states and intuitions that see psychological life and the subject itself as involving much that is unconscious as well. We can accommodate this latter understanding of the person and still retain Locke's insight if we simply recognize the fact that unconscious states have a powerful effect on consciousness and self-consciousness. The self-consciousness that Locke is after requires more than memory; it requires a certain level of self-understanding, and this, in turn, leads us to the attribution of psychological elements that help explain how our conscious experience comes to be as it is. The memory theory on its own is obviously too simple to explain what is distinctive about being a person, but the idea that we are what we are—and who we are—because we understand ourselves in a certain way is not. On at least one important conception, to be a person is, as Locke says, to recognize oneself as a person, and here identity is indeed determined by self-understanding. Given that we are ultimately trying to define beings as complex as ourselves, however, it should be no surprise that this self-understanding involves more than a simple act of recollection.