THE CONSTITUTION OF *Selves*

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OF *Selves*

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ITHACA AND LONDON

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TO MY FATHER

Gilbert Schechtman

AND IN MEMORY OF MY MOTHER

Vivienne Schechtman

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Preface

The personal identity problem has enjoyed a revival among analytic philosophers over the last three decades. Since questions of personal identity are of fundamental interest outside philosophy, there is some reason to hope that in this area philosophy will do what it is popularly thought to do—apply rigorous standards of argument and investigation to basic problems of human existence. A glance at the contemporary literature on personal identity, however, quickly disappoints these expectations. Instead of questions of self-knowledge, self-expression, and authenticity, we find discussions of the necessary and sufficient connections between entities called individual "person time-slices" which allow us to say they are slices of the same person. These creatures inhabiting philosophical theories of identity seem to have little to do with persons as we know them, and the concerns about identity these theorists address seem far removed from the compelling identity issues familiar to us from lived experience, psychology, and literature.

The contemporary philosophical discussion of identity omits a great deal that seems central to the topic of personal identity. This book is motivated by my own disappointment. My goal is to articulate more clearly what contemporary analytic work on personal identity neglects. In Part I, I consider central issues from within the contemporary debate, arguing that current analytic identity theorists have failed even on their own terms. In Part II, I step outside the confines of standard personal identity literature, using resources and issues neglected by the standard discussion to provide more robust and satisfying perspectives on questions about persons and personal identity. Here I focus on our experience of life as lived history, investigating how personal identity is linked to the capacity to construct coherent autobiographical narratives and to enter into the activities and social interactions that define the lives of persons.

Much of the preliminary work involved in understanding and criticizing

the standard debate on personal identity got under way at Harvard University. I am grateful to the many friends and teachers there who guided me through the preliminary phases and have continued to provide support, insight, and inspiration. First and foremost, I thank Stanley Cavell, who helped shape my most basic sensibilities by demonstrating exciting new ways to engage with traditional philosophical debates. His influence can be felt on every page of the book. I also thank Burton Dreben, Juliet Floyd, Sharon Lloyd, Nick Pappas, Hilary Putnam, Tim Scanlon, Miriam Solomon, and Paul Weithman, each of whom made a crucial contribution to my project in one way or another, and Jennifer Whiting, who gave me my first systematic introduction to the topic of personal identity. I also thank Harvard for generous financial support and the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation for granting me a Charlotte Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship for the academic year 1987–88.

I wrote the bulk of this book while on the faculty at The University of Illinois at Chicago. The philosophy department there is an extraordinarily congenial place to work; I can hardly imagine a department more nurturing of its faculty. I am deeply grateful to my colleagues—past and present—for their generosity with everything: leaves of absence, scheduling flexibility, encouragement, and time spent reading and commenting on work in progress. I especially thank Charles Chastain, Walter Edelberg, Dorothy Grover, Bill Hart, Christopher Hoyt, Peter Hylton, Connie Meinwald, Paul Teller, and Kent Wilson for their insights, suggestions, and enthusiasm. I also thank the university for its support and for a Campus Research Board grant that freed me from teaching duties in the spring of 1990.

Many others have also played central roles in the completion of my project. Here I acknowledge two especially important debts. Randy Carter's comments on the manuscript were always clear and valuable. In addition, he led me to a body of literature that together with his suggestions resulted in a total reconfiguration of Part I. Richard Wollheim has had an impact on the project since its inception. His book *The Thread of Life*, which came out while I was just beginning my work on personal identity, gave me the courage to pursue my intuitions and a rich set of resources to employ while doing so. Not only have his views continued to have a major impact on the formation of my own, but his gracious critique helped me to sharpen and focus the argument of Part II.

The manuscript was also vastly improved by the suggestions and comments of an enormously sympathetic and insightful referee at Cornell University Press, and by the extremely helpful input of my editor, Roger Haydon.

Finally, I thank my family and my husband, John Marko, whose conversation, enthusiasm for my work, and overall support have been essential to the preparation of this book.

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The Constitution of Selves

Introduction

Facts about personal identity stand at the core of our ordinary practice and lay the foundations for our day-to-day interactions. Philosophical problems of identity should thus be compelling, accessible, and of general appeal. Yet treatments of this topic in contemporary analytic philosophy have been highly abstract, technical, and specialized. Philosophical discussion has yielded some extremely sophisticated theories of personal identity, but they do not seem to be about persons as we know them, nor do they capture the real-world implications of personal identity. Indeed, it has been notoriously difficult for any of the views of identity currently in vogue to explain why personal identity matters to us at all.

It may be an unfortunate fact that treating real-life concerns with philosophical rigor necessarily robs them of some of their pre-philosophical interest. Still, debates about personal identity have become so far removed from the concerns that originally impelled them that it seems as if something more must be amiss in this case. In what follows I argue that the problem with philosophical accounts of personal identity originates in the failure of contemporary identity theorists to recognize the full complexity of the issues they discuss. These theorists do not recognize that there is no monolithic "question of personal identity," but rather a variety of identity questions arising in different contexts, bearing diverse significance, and demanding distinct kinds of answers. It is thus important for philosophers working on the topic of personal identity to be clear about which question of identity is under consideration. Failure to achieve such clarity confuses the discussion in a way that impedes progress on *any* identity question.

This book uncovers and addresses an especially significant and philosophically costly example of this phenomenon. Most modern personal identity theorists, I charge, conflate two significantly different questions, which I call the reidentification question and the characterization question. The former is the question of what makes a person at time t_2 the same

person as a person at time t_1; the latter the question of which beliefs, values, desires, and other psychological features make someone the person she is. The reidentification question thus concerns the logical relation of identity, whereas the characterization question concerns identity in the sense of what is generally called, following Erikson, an "identity crisis."

Those working on what is called "the problem of personal identity" in the modern English-speaking tradition usually address themselves formally to the reidentification question and so expect their views to take the form of a reidentification criterion. I maintain that these "reidentification theorists" fail to appreciate the boundaries of this question. As a result considerations linked to the characterization question creep into their investigation and are used (inappropriately) to guide their formulation of reidentification criteria, which undermines their project (as currently conceived) at its very foundations.

The fatal confusion stems from the central role reidentification theorists give to the practical importance of personal identity. There is a strong prephilosophical sense that facts about identity underlie facts about four basic features of personal existence: survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation (hereafter "the four features"). That we have such an intuition, and that it stands at the core of many of our basic practices, is beyond question. Reidentification theorists seem to assume that since they are working on defining personal identity, and since identity is linked to the four features, their definition of identity must capture that link. They thus use the ability to make sense of the connection between the four features and personal identity as a test of the acceptability of proposed reidentification criteria.

It is the use of this constraint which leads contemporary theorists into trouble. I contend that the four features are indeed linked to facts about personal identity, but identity in the sense at issue in the characterization question, not the reidentification question. It is thus a theory of characterization and not of reidentification that is properly charged with the responsibility of explaining the connection between identity and the four features. The attempt to make a reidentification criterion do so is thus out of place and, in the end, doomed to failure. Because reidentification theorists do not recognize this, they are forced into contortions that render them incapable of capturing our intuitions about either the four features or reidentification.

In order to push the discussion of personal identity forward it is necessary to separate the two questions and deal with each in its own terms. The reidentification question must be pursued without the unreasonable demand that it speak to our intuitions about the four features, and the four

features must be investigated within the more congenial context of the characterization question, where they belong. In what follows I argue for this claim and offer an account of characterization that explains the intuitive link between identity and the four features.

This book advances the discussion of personal identity in several ways. Most generally, it shows how the conflation of different identity questions can undermine useful discussion and so underscores the need to recognize the multifarious nature of personal identity and keep clear on exactly which question is under consideration. Second, it frees reidentification theories from the futile attempt to capture the link between identity and the four features, thus making it possible to pursue the reidentification question productively (a task I do not undertake, but whose general contours I do discuss). Finally, it provides a positive view of characterization, offering insight into one of the most compelling questions of personal identity and shedding light on the relation between personal identity and survival, moral responsibility, self-interested concern, and compensation.

Part I

Reidentification