

Notes on The Metaphysics and Politics of Personhood: Issues in the Social Ontology of Persons

Introduction

— This is part of a much larger project. It started with my thinking about the nature of persons and personal identity at the purely metaphysical level.

— Now what I am going to say is, I don't think, particularly earth shattering, or even original, in fact. It is worth saying because the points I am going to make have not, I believe, been sufficiently recognized either in the philosophical literature, or in public discourse.

— It only later occurred to me that of course my ideas would have political implications given the nature of what I was theorizing about, and so I started thinking about the political consequences of various metaphysical theories in addition to my own. Eventually, I want to argue that the metaphysical view I endorse is the best view politically speaking, but today, I will only have time to argue against a very specific view, what I call "the integrated self view."

— I was then impressed with the fact that these consequences, in some cases, were extremely wide-ranging and I hoped that my own view could avoid them.

— I then wondered why I took these consequences as a reason for rejecting the corresponding metaphysical theories.

— And I'm still not entirely sure what the argument is, but here is one relatively uncontroversial thing to say.

— **Epistemic Principle:** If our metaphysical concept of a person is influenced by irrelevant external factors, including political factors, being intellectually responsible requires considering multiple theories in multiple domains and coming to some kind of picture that

coheres with as many intuitions about persons in as many domains as possible. Theories that do not meet this standard ought to be rejected.

— I suspect, however, that the issue goes deeper than this. I suspect that because persons are social kinds, rather than natural kinds, that our theories of persons qua metaphysical theories, are constituted by certain normative assumptions.

— However, if even the epistemic thesis is true, theories of persons that do not fit with our moral and political intuitions are cause for alarm, assuming that theory is not itself free from irrelevant external influences.

— As it turns out, one very deeply entrenched idea about persons does not sit well with certain moral and political intuitions, at least mine anyway. Specifically, this is the theory I will call “the integrated self theory.” I don’t really have a specific philosophical target in mind per se that endorses this view. It just seems to be one that loosely characterizes a lot of philosophical theorizing about the self, and also, just general common sense core beliefs that we, as a society, all seem to have about it.

Some Basic Features of Personhood

— At least one requirement on counting as a person is to have a self. Having a self involves having consciousness, thoughts, reason, emotions, beliefs, and self-awareness.

— But being a person also carries with it having a certain moral status, of being worthy of moral consideration.

— The concept of person sets standards for who can count as a person that includes at least the requirement of having a self.

— And this standard then comes to serve as a bar one must meet to be granted a certain moral status.

— So theories of persons are normative in that the criteria for being a person serves as a standard, and they have normative consequences for those who do and do not meet this standard.

— Many theories of persons have a particular notion of the self that is required for being a person — the integrated self theory.

The Integrated Self Theory

— This theory often involves two ideas. First the obvious one: (a) to have a self is to be a coherent, integrated, or unified entity — its traits/actions/motives/intentions/beliefs are coordinated, or blended into a functioning or unified whole, or are consistent and cohere with each other. Second, and less obviously, is another common assumption, not unique to this idea, but characteristic of many theories of the self, and that is: (b) that having these integrated selves is independent of the political environment

— At least two separate psychological models of the self adhere to (a).

— the standard view of psychological continuity held by Parfit and Lewis among others. This this says that psychological continuity consists in the causal dependence of later states on previous states and similarity between adjacent states. The similarity requirement means no major sudden conversions or mind changing. There must be a certain degree of homogeneity in order to have a self.

— The narrative view, due to Schetchman, among others, also arguably a psychological view, can allow for change between adjacent states, but one must be able to tell a coherent narrative about oneself, again, putting an integration requirement upon having a self.

— Also, as a matter of default, these views, as well as others, also make assumption (b) — they do not typically consider having a self as a political feat, or at least, they do not explicitly attend to this aspect of things.

— These two assumptions are, in fact, ubiquitous. We see it expressed, for example, in the mental health profession that advocates for the idea that healthy selves are integrated wholes, and further advocates for an individualist, rather than a political, approach for achieving this integration.

Rejecting Standard Assumptions

Against (b): Integrated Self Theory as Influenced by Political Factors

— However, having an integrated self is, in fact, influenced by irrelevant external forces, specifically, political ones.

— Here's why I think it is: while the integrated self is an ideal we hold dear, it is one that can be pursued only by those who have adequate control over their environments, a luxury reserved only for those who have enough privilege to exercise a certain degree of control over outside de-integrating forces that could affect them.

— But not everyone has this kind of privilege.

— That is, the model of the integrated self is itself rooted in and originates from privileged circles. The integrated self, for those groups, is much more readily attainable, and therefore seems normal to this group and because of their privilege they can go ahead and impose this model on others.

Against (a): The Negative Political Consequences of the Integrated Self Theory

— Not only is the integration standard biased, it is also perniciously self-perpetuating.

– The more privilege one has, the more likely one is to have an integrated self, but also, the more privileged one is, the more power one has to impose one’s conceptions upon our public, personal and institutional values.

– So, one can obtain an integrated self only if one is privileged, and at the same time, that privilege is partially maintained by ruling out those who do not have privilege, who might not have readily attainable integrated selves, as full persons.

– For many, even attempting to achieve an integrated self is beyond their grasp, those of who may have been sexually assaulted, who live as outsiders within, who have mental health issues, and/or who are members of groups that have faced historical and current forms of oppression.

– Such circumstances produce what we might call “heterogenous selves,” selves that face a multitude of environmental forces many times thrusting contradictory norms, roles, and traits, upon those subjected to them.

– These forces can lead to selves that are not always consistent or coherent or integrated.

– And, on the integration model, these heterogenous selves would be seen as defective and in need of a remedy that is played out on a personal level, another unjust outcome of the Integrated Self Theory.

– Often, those who lack integrated selves are often referred for ineffective counseling, medication, or both, if they are lucky.

– The integrated self model rules out wide swaths of individuals as fully functioning persons. In fact, it would rule out those often most in need of recognition of full personhood.

– Due to its politically biased nature, and its negative political consequences, the Integrated Self Theory ought to be rejected.

Objections and Replies

Objection 1: Integration is a Requirement on Having a Self

- After all, there have to be some constraints on what counts as having a self, and on what counts as a person.
- For example, a person with Alzheimer's is most certainly damaged and their status as fully functioning person's is questionable.
- Or consider dissociative disorder. Surely such a person is so heterogenous that we want to say something has gone wrong here.
- and surely it seems plausible to think that what has gone wrong in these cases is that psychological coherence either over time or at a time has broken down.
- While of course there have to be some minimal unity requirements if we are to individuate persons as kinds and as individuals in and of themselves, these constraints, I would like to suggest they are very minimal.

Response 1: Heterogenous Selves Have Advantages

- a thick concept of the kind we see with say standard psychological continuity theory, or narrative theories, is too stringent, and I believe has its roots in the fact that it has historically been relatively privileged people doing the theorizing about the nature of personhood in the first place.
- Privileging the integrated self as the ideal also leads to pathologizing difference, and this limits our ability to recognize the benefits of having less integrated selves than our ideals suggest.
- After all, it is not obvious that there is anything wrong with a heterogenous self.

– In fact, one might argue that the difficulties and problems faced by heterogenous selves are due in part because of a failure to accommodate them.

– instead of attempting to integrate heterogenous selves into current social contexts, we ought to be changing the context, in the same way we do for others that are differently abled.

– in fact, the neuro-diversity movement has been gaining ground, and some employers are tapping into the benefits of those who have heterogeneous selves.

– For example, while a bipolar individual may have periods of high and low functioning, even treated, they have the benefit of insight into all facets of human emotional existence. From the depths of the despair to ecstasy, and this allows for a potentially larger ability to empathize with others.

– or take the ptsd victim who dissociates from their trauma. Properly understood and channeled, this ability could potentially contribute to thinking that is not fraught with emotional overtones, when such thinking is called for.

– or the person who has had to face shame and embarrassment and social ostracism due to their social status. They may have developed the ability to have less of an ego about certain things and therefore see things more clearly in terms of adjudicating between conflicts, or of seeing both sides of an issue, since they have learned that their perspective is not privileged.

Objection 2: We Can Still Treat Heterogenous Selves with Respect

– We might maintain a commitment to the integrated self as an ideal, but refuse to treat those who fail to meet that ideal as somehow not worthy of moral consideration in practice.

Response 2: Paternalism, Pity, and Blind Spots

— the danger with the previous line of thinking is that it can lead to a kind of paternalistic thinking. We know you're defective, but we'll treat you as a full person as a favor and as a kindness.

— This way of thinking does not allow us to question the integrated self model and perhaps replace it with one that respects the previous intuitions and yet avoids the negative consequences.

Objection 3: Provide More Access to Integrated Selves not Accommodation

Related to the last objection, the Integrated Self Theorist might also claim that the problem is not with the integrated self model, but with access to the opportunity to have one of them.

Response 3: Integrated Selves Are Not Sustainable in a More Just Society

— But, if in fact we do have a more just society, this cannot simply involve making everyone equally as prosperous as the top 1%, since this is not sustainable. A more equitable distribution of resources, given that they are limited, will likely dictate that the most powerful will become less so, and therefore will be subject to many of the vicissitudes that the less powerful are subject to anyway. And of course we can seek ways to encourage heterogenous selves in ways other than traumatizing people.

Objection 4: Endorsing Heterogenous Selves is Endorsing Harm

— of course the objection to all of this is that these so-called heterogenous selves come from a traumatic or painful place. So am I tacitly justifying treating these people badly or for social injustice as a necessary evil?

Response 4: Committing the Genetic Fallacy

— But, of course, I need not endorse harm to endorse heterogenous selves. The origin of the nature of the result produced are two different things. So we might think the result has benefits without endorsing the means by which that result came about. Maria Lugones for instance argues about the benefits of being bi-cultural, of its tendency to produce a heterogenous self, and being bi-cultural is not a horrible thing.

Conclusion

— Having a view that can accommodate those with heterogenous selves as persons is preferable to views that require integration.