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

by
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Abstract: What makes a person the same over time through many changes is a question dealt with by many philosophers. I too offer an answer to this question. However, as with many other theorists, I offered an answer outside of considering the political consequences of the theory I offered. Upon reflection, I now see that this was a mistake in need of correction, since, arguably, having a theory about how a person remains one and the same over time conceptually presupposes an understanding of what it is to be a person altogether. That is, the question of what it is to remain the same person over time seems to logically require that one must first remain a person. While it may seem that counting as a person is a purely metaphysical matter, the fact is having the status of being a person is highly significant both morally and politically as any social movement fighting for the recognition of certain individuals as persons easily shows. To ignore the moral and political consequences of a metaphysical theory of persons is therefore ethically irresponsible. I argue that many of the underlying assumptions about the nature of persons in much of the philosophical literature on the metaphysics of persons are ethically and politically biased in favor of a conception of persons that disadvantages certain individuals, and that examining and correcting these biases is essential given the potential impact on our political and economic institutions. I offer what I hope to be a less biased understanding of personhood that includes those disadvantaged by the current understanding of what it is to be a person.

1. Introduction

Many philosophers ask: what makes an individual one and the same person throughout the various changes throughout their lifetimes (Parfit, 1971, 1974, 1995, 1999, 2012; David Lewis, 1973, 1983; Locke, 1964; Hudson, 2001; Korsgaard, 1989, among many others). I offer an answer to this question in another work.¹ However, as with many other theorists, the theory I developed was not done so by considering the political consequences of it. Upon reflection, I now see that this was a mistake in need of correction, since, arguably, having a theory about how a person remains one and the same over time conceptually presupposes an understanding of the kind person. That is, the question of what it is to remain the same person over time seems

¹ See my 2022.

to logically require that one must first remain a person. One of the essential features a person is assumed to have a self or sense of self. While it may seem that counting as a person is a purely metaphysical matter, the fact is that having this status is highly significant both morally and politically as any social movement vying for recognition as persons easily shows. To ignore the moral and political consequences of a metaphysical theory of persons is therefore ethically irresponsible.

I argue that many of the underlying assumptions about what it is to be a self or have a sense of self in much of the philosophical literature are biased in a way that unfairly disadvantages certain individuals. Because of the potential impact on our political, cultural, and economic institutions, examining and correcting these biases is required.

In the next section, I address the reason for attending to ethical and political implications of metaphysical theories of persons, and why metaphysical theories ought to be intertwined with these considerations. In section three, I offer a description of the received view of the concept of a self at work in much of the metaphysical literature – the integrated self. And in section four I discuss the negative ethical and political consequences of the integrated self theory and I therefore conclude that there is a need for a normative and descriptively adequate replacement. In section five, I briefly describe what I will call the “heterogenous” self. This section describes heterogenous selves and shows that there is a wide swath of people who have this type of self as opposed to an integrated self and discusses the injustice of our failure to recognize this type of self as producing full persons as well. Section six addresses some objections to my line of reasoning, and in section seven, I offer responses to these objections.

2. Why Moral and Political Consequences of Metaphysical Theories of the Self Matter

What I argue is not particularly earth shattering. Nevertheless, I do not believe the points I will make have been sufficiently recognized either in philosophical literature, or in public discourse.

Nevertheless, metaphysical theories of the nature of the external world are not normally considered sensitive to ethical and political matters since metaphysical accounts of the nature of any kind of individual are about the intrinsic nature of those individuals in question. Therefore, ethical and political consequences are irrelevant concerning their correctness because these consequences concern the extrinsic relations of individuals to their environments, and these are not defining of their intrinsic nature. In general, this reaction is reasonable. However, for theories of individuals whose nature is infused with a normative status, like persons, or whose nature is environmentally dependent, such as the value of currency, it is not reasonable.

I cannot, however, offer a detailed theory of exactly how the nature of a person is intertwined with normativity, I can however offer a few plausible reasons for believing this. First, counting as a person imbues a normative status upon those so counted as entitled to certain rights that are nearly unquestionable. Second, the fact that a person is environmentally dependent in various ways, and therefore develops in a way sensitive to extrinsic factors, also has a fair amount of support (citations XXX). While this is far from a theory of the normative nature of personhood, these reasons do recommend prudence concerning the ethical and political implications of our metaphysical theories of their nature. In recognition of this, I recommend a particular epistemic or methodological principle that should bind metaphysical theories of persons that is as follows:

The Prudence Principle: If our metaphysical concept of a kind of individual is in some ways clearly intertwined with normativity or is environmentally dependent, then that concept can be influenced by irrelevant external factors, including ethical and political biases. In such cases, being intellectually responsible requires considering multiple theories in multiple domains and offering one that coheres with as many appropriate ethical and political intuitions concerning counting as an individual of that kind in as many domains as possible. Metaphysical theories that do not meet this standard ought to be rejected.

It follows that if only the prudence principle is true, theories of personhood that do not fit with

our moral and political intuitions are cause for alarm, assuming that these theories are not free from irrelevant externally biased influences.

At some point, I want to argue that the metaphysical view of personal survival that I endorse in my other work is at least better than others politically speaking, but today, I will only argue that metaphysicians of persons should focus on the political consequences of their theories, and I will point out some of the pernicious consequences of a version of the nature of persons that plagues public discourse but is also deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition. I call it “the integrated self-view.” At least two of the most prominent philosophical theories of personal identity simply assume the integrated self-view – most narrative views as well as standard psychological continuity theory. However, it is also simply a commonsense core belief that we, as a society, all seem to assume is true.

3. The Integrated Self Theory

As before, at least one requirement on counting as a person is to have a what is called a self. Having a self involves having consciousness, thoughts, reason, emotions, and beliefs. We can think of having a self as having psychological states. However, being a person involves more than simply having psychological states, as our failure to count many beings that have psychological states as persons, such as corvids who mainly can only see, but are not very sentient (Birch et al, 2020), for instance. Among other things, such as agency or having free will, being a person also carries with it certain rights and being worthy of moral consideration – a kind of normative status.

If having a self is necessary for personhood, then understanding what it is to have a self is required. In general terms, a typical account of what it is to have a self is what I call “the integrated self” theory. It is composed of two ideas. First an obvious one: (a) to have a self is to be a coherent, integrated, or reconciled entity – its traits/actions/motives/intentions/beliefs are

coordinated or blended into a functioning or unified whole. The second idea, though not essential to the view, but that is not typically explicitly recognized, is: (b) that having an integrated self is an individual internal apolitical matter.

At least two separate psychological models of personhood, or of having a self, adhere to (a) and (b). These two views are known as the psychological continuity theory of personhood, and the narrative view of personhood.

The standard view of psychological continuity developed by Parfit (1971) and Lewis (1983), among others claims that psychological continuity consists in the causal dependence of later states on previous states and, an additional requirement, similarity between adjacent states. That is, no sudden arbitrary changes between adjacent mental states for no reason.

These two conditions combined would produce a well-integrated self. For example, a person's dinner plans for tonight are based on having defrosted salmon the night before – an example of the causal dependence requirement. Or consider the avid golfer who in the middle of a tournament loses all interest in the game completely – an example of the similarity requirement. That is, there must be a certain degree of homogeneity over time to count as the same person. But what implications does this have for having a sense of self and therefore for being a person? Presumably, to have a sense of self, an individual's initial psychological states must cohere enough to be comparable at later times using a similarity metric. However, to measure psychological similarity between adjacent states over time, there must first be an initial unified whole to compare to a later unified whole. This commits psychological continuity theory to the integrated self theory.

But so does the idea expressed in (b). On the integrated self view, it should not matter whether you are now writing, a dog owner, and live at a certain address. Losing any of these properties would be irrelevant to whether you are one and the same person.

The narrative view, developed by Brison (1990), McIntyre (1981), and Schechtman (2011), among others, is also a theory that emphasizes a person's psychology. While this view can allow for sudden change between adjacent psychological states, it still requires that a person is eventually able to tell a coherent narrative about themselves. This, again, relies on an integration requirement for having a self. Our life stories must make sense – have a beginning, middle, end, and have justified reasons for our actions over time and so on.

4. Against the Integrated Self Theory

It is simply a fact (Leckell et al., 2022) that having an integrated self or counting as such is influenced by irrelevant external forces, specifically, genetic, political, socio-economic, and cultural forces. Here's how and why I believe this is the case: while having an integrated self is presented as an ideal way of having a self, it is easily attainable only by those who are resource rich (Leckell et al.), since they have more control, unfortunately than many of us, over the effect of external forces. But not many have this kind of privilege.

That is, the model of the integrated self is itself an artefact that comes from privileged classes. Because it is more readily attainable by members of these classes, having an integrated self seems normal to them. In addition, due to their privilege, it is also a theory that they can impose on others as an ideal.

However, unless you are privileged, which most are not, this is not fair. And it is not fair in a significant way. It has kept women, people of color, those with unconventional sexual orientations, or gender identities, the economically impoverished, the homeless, and those with "mentally illnesses" from having the normal constitutional rights that any person should have. Now, do these people have such integrated selves and we simply need to recognize this? Traditionally, this is the way first wave feminism, and the civil rights movements made progress. But I do not believe that everyone has an integrated self. In fact, according to Dobrowski (1964),

integration and disintegration is the actual norm.

4.1 The Political Nature of the Integrated Self Theory

Not only is the integration standard biased, but it is also perniciously self-perpetuating in the following way: 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. The point is that it much easier to attain 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 those deemed persons by the integrated self view.

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, who are institutionalized, and/or who are members of groups that have faced historical and current forms of oppression, the socio-economic disinvested and more.

Such circumstances produce what we might call "heterogenous selves," selves that face a multitude of environmental forces beyond their control that many thrust 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, which ought to be a political issue, not simply a personal issue. Unfortunately, heterogeneous selves are often referred for ineffective counseling, medication, or both if they are lucky.

The integrated self view 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.

Assuming one of the properties a person must have is a self, there must be some constraints on what counts as having a self. For example, a person with Alzheimer's is most certainly damaged and their status as fully functioning person is questionable, but do they have a self? So long as there are sapient beings, I would say "yes." Or consider dissociative disorder. Surely such a person is so heterogenous that we want to say something has gone wrong here. Now one diagnosis of what has gone wrong is that these individuals are disintegrated. And this might be right. Still, you do not have to believe the integrated self theory to accept this diagnosis. Surely, there is a point at which beings become so disintegrated that they no longer count as the same beings. While of course there must 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.

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. To make strong integration a requirement making a strong integrated self the ideal person, encourages pathologizing difference.

Politically biased assumptions that endorse at least assumption (b) concerning personhood are not limited to philosophical theories. These assumptions are, in fact, ubiquitous. They are expressed, for example, by the mental health profession regularly who endorse the idea that mental well-being is an individual matter, specifically, a matter of that individual's ability to function in the current socio-political context. In fact, one of the criteria for possible mental illness include:

- experiencing discrimination and stigma, including racism

- social disadvantage, poverty or debt
- unemployment or losing your job
- homelessness (mindord.uk)

Do the previous list seem like causes of mental illness, an individual affair, or do they seem to indicate that something is wrong with the current socio-political context? The answer I believe is “yes.” Counseling would not seem to be the appropriate treatment to eliminate the previous list.

Assumption (a) is endorsed by the idea that having a healthy sense of self involves the ability to make sense of oneself as an integrated whole (Brison). These individuals are deemed unhealthy and in need of remedy.

The fact that having a self is required for being a person, and that having a self requires a kind of integration or ability to function successfully in the current socio-political context, means that the mental health system has a significant say in whether an individual counts as a person with all the attendant rights. Given that the education, justice, and employment systems frequently rely on the opinions of mental health professionals in determining how to treat an individual makes the mental health system a powerful institution.

That the mental health profession is biased is illustrated by the fact that the diagnostic criteria for a diagnosis of mental illness shift frequently and are determined by those already empowered. In addition, because mental illness is stigmatized, its diagnoses is almost irrevocable due to confirmation bias, and the longevity of an individual’s medical record, a diagnosis has dire consequences for those diagnosed. It results in undermining an individual’s credibility, autonomy, and the silencing of their voices.

5. Heterogenous Selves

6. Objections

I will now address two objections. All objections can be addressed and dispensed with.

6.1 Objection: Grant Everyone The Status and Opportunity to Have an Integrated Self

The first claims that an integrated self ought to be an ideal given that it allows those who have it the highest chance of success in the current socio-political system.

While the integrated self apologist might claim that we could temporarily grant everyone an “integrated self” both for moral and practical reasons. That is, the integrated self theorist might believe that the problem is not with the integrated self model, but with access to the opportunity to have one of them. First, doing so would ensure the opportunity to gain equal moral status for everyone, and second having an integrated self gives everyone the highest chance for success in the current socio-political system. That is, 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 defective.

There are several ethical problems with the previous line of thinking. First, 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 a kindness. Second, it is simply unrealistic to expect many to be able to take advantage of such an opportunity or to even want it. Recall some of the causes of mental illness. The potential damage incurred by those upon whom having an integrated self is imposed, since some would likely fail to achieve it, and others might outright reject it, makes this approach unethical.

Secondly, this objection fails to address the assumption that (a) an integrated self is desirable at all. This approach also accepts assumption (b) that circumstances beyond the individual’s control might prevent them from attaining it – that having an integrated self is an individualized process.

The practical problem with this idea is that 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.

Last, it closes off considering alternative conceptions of the self. After all, it is not obvious that there is anything ethically or even medically wrong with those that have heterogenous selves. In fact, some employers have acknowledged the benefits of those who are on the autism spectrum (citation).

Consider, for example, a bipolar individual who may have periods of high and low functioning, even treated. However, they have the benefit of insight into all facets of human emotional existence. From the depths of despair to ecstasy, and this allows for a potentially larger ability to empathize with others. Or consider PTSD victims who learn 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, but increases an individual's empathy, compassion, and patience with those who do not have heterogenous selves. In short, it does not recognize the advantages of having a heterogenous self.

6.2 Objection: Endorsing Heterogenous Selves is Endorsing Harm

The second objection to my inquiry is that all these so-called heterogenous selves come from a traumatic or painful place. So, am I tacitly justifying treating people badly or forcing them to experience trauma, poverty, racism, and homelessness?

First, not all heterogenous selves come from a painful background. Some are simply born heterogenous. Second, I need not endorse harm to endorse heterogenous selves. There are multiple ways to have a heterogenous self – the initial Harvard studies (citation) of tacit bias has since found that simply priming oneself to be open to different configurations of the self enables

privileged individuals to overcome certain prejudices. Studies by the charity give directly have also illustrated that implementing a basic income increases the quality of living without any mention of mental illness or remedying it. Exposing children to multiple cultures can also help with understanding different ways of having a self. In other words, the origin of the nature of the result produced are two different things. It is possible that heterogeneous selves can come about without endorsing the current means by which that result came about. Maria Lugones (citation) 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 negative state of being.

7. Conclusion

Instead of attempting to integrate heterogenous selves into current social contexts, we ought to change the external world, in the same way we do for others that are differently abled. Having a view that can accommodate those with heterogenous selves as persons is preferable to views that require integration.

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