

# UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES BETTER

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MARYA SCHECHTMAN AND Grant Gillett acknowledge that my case in ‘The misunderstandings of the Self-Understanding View’ (2013) has some merits, but neither is moved to change their position and accept that the Psychological View has more going for it (and the Self-Understanding View less) than Schechtman originally contended. Schechtman thinks her case could be better expressed, and then the deficiencies of the Psychological View will be manifest. That view is committed to Locke’s insight about the importance of phenomenological connections to identity, but cannot do justice to this insight and as a result fails to explain things that it should. I will argue that my case still applies, re-expression notwithstanding, and that the Psychological View is much better off as an account of identity than either respondent acknowledges.

The Psychological View does not capture what Schechtman presents as Locke’s insight. Phenomenological connections only feature now and then in its account of the self and, although they are seen as important connections, they are not fundamental to the account. Phenomenological connections are one sort of psychological connection among the many that constitute the continuity that features in this account. The account allows, as she pointed out in 2005, even whole life phases

that count as ours but to which we have no conscious access.

I maintain that the Psychological View has got this right. Much of our psychological life, relevant to our personhood, goes on without our awareness. Locke agrees: he imagines a “Spirit wholly stripp’d of all its memory or consciousness of past Actions, *as we find our Minds are of a great part of ours, and sometimes of them all*” (Locke 1975, 346 [my italics]). This is true of unconscious states like repressed ones, which may strongly affect behavior, and also true of everyday states like intentions: once an intention is formed, it will be most effective if we manage to get it out of our consciousness—thinking about it may well lead to wavering and giving in to temptation (Holton 2009, 98–9). In her reply, Schechtman concedes that the Psychological View copes well with unconscious states, something she seemed to deny originally. Her clarified position is that it cannot cope with them *and* capture Locke’s insight. But my point is that it only copes so well *because* it gives a lesser role to phenomenological connections: the narrative attempt to include them as fundamental alongside unconscious states is one of the places where narrative views unravel.

Schechtman presents the attractiveness of the Self-Understanding View as being its placement of phenomenological connections as central to identity (with the advantages this brings in explaining self-concern and moral responsibility) while also coping with unconscious states. My contention

(which was not as clear as it might have been) was that in doing one of those, it loses the ability to do the other satisfactorily.

In its account of identity, self-concern, and personal moral responsibility, the phenomenological aspect is foregrounded. It is because we can make sense of actions and states as ours that they are ours and that we are responsible for them. However, this leaves out many unconscious states and activities which are ours. It certainly leaves out repressed states and the real reasons behind many actions—such as in the case of the shoppers that I raised. The states that the shoppers can make sense of as theirs are not the ones behind their choices—they are not the causes of their behavior. Schechtman's Self-Understanding View included unconscious states in the picture by appealing to the need that others have in making sense of a person's life (Schechtman 2005, 20). Now she puts it as such states being "in a position to trouble self-interpretation, and so to disturb the experience of unity" (Schechtman 2013, 49). But neither of these attempts manages to include the empathic access to states and experiences that performed the function of explaining them as ours and made us responsible 'to and for' them. Moreover, the repressed person—like the shoppers—may well have no disturbance in their experience of unity. Their sense of self is intact, but it is a misrepresentation of what is going on. Narrative is crucial in our formation of a sense of self, but our sense of self is often a poor guide to ourselves.

There are countless everyday instances of this—like the shoppers—but pathological cases make the gap graphic. Sufferers from thought-insertion experience the thoughts of others occurring in their minds. They are certain these are not their thoughts and the thoughts have no place in their sense of self (Mullins and Spence 2003). But they *are* their thoughts, and are certainly not the thoughts of those the sufferers ascribe them to. All of this gives us strong reason to question Schechtman's suggestion that "identity involves the continuation of . . . self-experience" (Schechtman 2013, 49).

Thus, my charge is that the narrative or Self-Understanding View can include phenomenological connections, but at the cost of a coherent

account of unconscious states. If it includes the latter, it loses its distinctive explanation of what makes actions and states ours and what makes us responsible for them.

The Psychological View has no similar dilemma. As Schechtman now acknowledges, it includes unconscious states unproblematically because it does not require phenomenological connections in its account of what makes states ours. Schechtman suggests that my defence of the view faces a different problem here, however, in that the Psychological View *is committed to* Locke's insight and so obliged to require phenomenological connections in its account. My response would thus be in conflict with other commitments of the view. But I think this is not true—neither the Psychological View nor Locke have the commitments she envisages.

Her suggestion is that the commitment springs from the reliance of the Psychological View on the sort of thought experiments that Locke used to ground his position. The idea is presumably that (first) body-swap thought experiments like Locke's prince and cobbler case work only because of the resonance of certain phenomenological features of the characters in the story, and (second) that the Psychological View requires these thought experiments to establish itself over competing views—Olson's animalism is the one she mentions. But the first claim does not commit the Psychological theorist to the necessity of phenomenological connections and the second claim seems to me to be false. In the case of second claim, although Psychological theorists often do use thought experiments, they are by no means universally favored—Nicholas Agar (2003), for example, presents a case for the view that sets out to avoid them; and although they may be a useful heuristic tool, they are not crucial in making the case against animalism. The appeal of the Psychological View over animalism issues from a widespread understanding that persons are fundamentally agents—that is, psychological things. On Olson's animalist account, they are not; but then it seems that we are talking about different things and that his theory is not about persons in our sense at all. This intuition that persons are fundamentally agents is one (as I made clear) that is shared with narrative theorists. You

can reinforce it with a thought experiment if you want to, but there is no need for that.

Even if thought experiments were the favored method of supporting the Psychological View, and even if they did rely on phenomenological connections, this would not commit the view to those connections being necessary for identity. Thought experiments like the prince and the cobbler help to show that being the same animal is not necessary for personal identity. They do not establish any particular psychological feature *as* necessary. Locke presents the story as showing that having the same body is not required for being the same person—at most it is required for being the ‘same Man’: “And thus we may be able without any difficulty to conceive, the same Person at the Resurrection, though in a Body not exactly in make or parts the same which he had here” (Locke 1975, 340). The story (like any experiment) can only hope to establish what is *not* always or necessarily the case: it cannot establish what *is* necessary.

Furthermore, Locke seems to agree with the Psychological View that phenomenological connections are not necessary for identity (not even for being ‘the same consciousness’), as Shelley Weinberg (2011) has argued. Locke is at pains to have his view be consistent with divine rectification as the reference to the resurrection reminds us. He realizes that someone on the day of judgment may not have any phenomenological connection to themselves when they performed some past action for which they should be punished or rewarded (he talks of “the forgetfulness Men have of their past Actions,” 1975, 344). God could restore that connection on the day, thus making the person aware that their punishment was just, but then God would be using an account of personal identity that does not depend on phenomenological connections (although His theory of just punishment might well involve them). There is then something else to Locke’s notion of ‘the same consciousness’ than phenomenological connectedness—the person who on the day of judgment has forgotten their action is the person who committed it: they are in possession of the same consciousness, despite the missing phenomenological connection.

I have argued (in opposition to Schechtman’s contentions) that the Psychological View is not

committed to including phenomenological connections as fundamental to identity and that there are good reasons for not requiring them. But are there not some costs as well? Schechtman suggests that by offering only ‘likeness or continuity in the *contents* of consciousness,’ the Psychological View is unable to explain why the special concern we feel for our own future states is rationally required or to explain our moral responsibility ‘to and for’ past states and actions. This is what Parfit (who I cited as presenting the archetype Psychological View) calls the ‘Extreme Claim’—a claim that she says he embraces.

All of those suggestions go too far. Parfit hardly embraces the Extreme Claim. He acknowledges it is defensible (Parfit 1984, 310–1). But he also insists that its denial, a Moderate Claim—that the continuity envisaged by the Psychological View does provide reason for special concern and explanation of responsibility—is just as defensible (1984, 312). And indeed it is—or, at least, it is plausible that the Psychological View explains all that it can be expected to explain.

Schechtman’s reasoning as to why what the Psychological View offers is inadequate recalls the case she offered in her *The Constitution of Selves* (1996). Back then she wrote, “Self-interested concern is an emotion that is appropriately felt only toward my own self and not toward someone like me” (1996, 52) and “It doesn’t matter if the person who gets my paycheck is more *like* me than someone else; I am only compensated if *I* get the money” (1996, 52–3). This is clearly unfair as a criticism of the Psychological View. That view does not just require mere similarity in the content of mental states, but that the later states be similar *because of* the earlier states. My future self will have specific mental states because of the ones I have now—just as I am the kind of person I am now because of earlier experiences and influences. This is relevant to issues like desert, responsibility, and self-concern. It does not matter that someone like me gets paid for what I did because their current states do not have the right relation to experiences of mine: they do not feel the aches I feel *as a result of* the effort I put in to earn that paycheck. If they did feel those aches because of that effort and I did not, then it becomes much less

clear that they do not deserve the compensation.

More generally, psychological continuity involves much more than just a chain of similar states. Believing that I am in pain comes with a memory of what the pain originally felt like, of what I was doing at the time and with a range of other memories, beliefs, desires and other states: it is part of a complex psychological pattern. Psychological continuity involves an extremely complex pattern of these complex patterns. So Schechtman is correct that I am picturing ‘psychological causation of a functionalist stripe,’ but this is not just functionalist dogma—it is precisely what is involved in being a continuing psychological thing. And with these complex patterns in place, self-interested concern and matters of responsibility do anything but fall out of the picture. Self-interested concern may not be *rationally required* of the self of the psychological view, but it certainly can be explained and justified why you have a special concern for your own future self that you do not have for others. And although the Psychological View may not have an explanation of why you are morally responsible for all and only your actions, the complex causal links between you now and the self who performed the action go a long way to doing that, bearing also in mind my earlier contention that this moral principle is by no means as universal as Schechtman has claimed.

Gillett begins his response to my paper by outlining ‘another way of seeing things’ (Gillett 2013, 43). My original arguments were not aimed at any view other than a narrative or a Psychological View, so insofar as this is ‘another way’ it would not be affected by what I had to say. Nevertheless, he does make suggestions as to where aspects of his view coincide with a narrative view and may raise problems for my account. I focus on those.

First, however, I want to deny one thrust of his response. He characterizes my case against Schechtman’s view as falling into the camp of critics of narrative theories who argue that “narrative theories do not add anything to the more down-to-earth (potentially reductive) functional story” (Gillett 2013, 45). What I argued was not this. I held that Schechtman’s view had certain internal problems and was unable to cope adequately with unconscious states and argued that the Psychologi-

cal View was not plagued with these problems. Schechtman charges that the Psychological View will get ascriptions of states wrong—ascribing states to the wrong person and not ascribing others to the person to whom they belong. I contended that in most cases (other than those of unconscious states, which the Self-Understanding View has trouble ascribing correctly) the two theories will ascribe the same states to the same persons. That is not saying that narrative adds nothing. I accept that narrative plays an important role in our sense of self and perhaps in an account of autonomy, but that is not where the issue between the two theories lies.

The problems Gillett raises for my account relate to the supposed core of that account in functionalism. A central charge is that my “causal view assumes that the link between thoughts and behavior is causal but that thesis is highly suspect” (Gillett 2013, 44). Reasons, he responds, cannot be brute causal features of nature but rather work through you adjusting “your behavior to the human life-world, mutually fashioned out of meaning and contingency, and to shape what you do in a way that evinces a kind of integrity characteristic of the life story you are living” (Gillett 2013, 44).

I am not particularly sympathetic to this account of reasons, but that aside, I think this response misses the mark. The Psychological View is not an account of agency, although it does cast persons as agents. Even though it features causal connections, it is not tied to a causal theory of action (as I pointed out in the original article, I was using a deliberately thin notion of reasons for action). The causal connections that are its focus are between mental states, some of which will influence behavior—how that works is not specified by the theory. It is quite compatible with you shaping what you do in the fashion Gillett outlines. The only occasions where I insisted on a causal relation between mental states and behavior were in the cases of unconscious and unreasoned behavior like that of the shoppers. I think it is misleading to insist, as Gillett does, that causality has to be ‘brute’; but, even so, these cases strike me as involving some sort of ‘brute forces of nature.’ When it comes to such cases, the narrative that is offered is very often simply wrong: the behavior

has nothing to do with the life story you think you are living. And yet it is your behavior and the psychology behind it is yours.

The upshot is that I think that the considerations that Gillett and Schechtman offer do not undermine the defence I put forward of the Psychological View against Schechtman's criticisms of it. In the disagreement between it and the Self-Understanding View, it comes out remarkably well.

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