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There are two standard positions that dominate discussions of the essence of personal identity—neo-Lockean or psychological theories and bodily identity theories. Beck (2013) is concerned with what is perhaps an internecine dispute between psychological theories that pits the Parfitian or functionalist views against narrative views. A neuroethically grounded narrative approach to personal identity therefore is of interest in that it goes beyond narrative to real essence (Gillett 2008; Locke 1689). Beck’s functionalist take on Parfit’s neo-Lockean or psychological continuity account is an anti-narrative view (as is that of Galen Strawson [2004]), but to engage with it, the analytic tools of neuroethics must first be applied to essentialism and the metaphysics of identity.

Neuroethics is an attempt to relate contemporary neuroscience to philosophical ethics by drawing on cognitive neuroscience and neuroimaging. One version of neuroethics is, broadly, Aristotelian and is deeply influenced by phenomenology (particularly that of Merleau-Ponty). ‘Psyche,’ ‘soul,’ and ‘mind’ are regarded as terms picking out that set of characteristics distinctive of a living human being and therefore internally related to personal identity. Neuroethics of this stripe holds that the real essence of the human psyche is to be elucidated, inter alia, by examining how a human being engages with a world of meaning created within (and abstracted from) human discourse.1 The stance is holistic and naturalistic, and teases out the logical entailments and grounds to yield a clear and distinct idea of proper instances of the metaphysical species ‘living human being’ as articulated in terms compatible with our best current knowledge in relevant natural sciences—prominently psychology in general and cognitive neuroscience in particular.

The relevant neuroethical variant of that approach treats metaphysical essences as abstractions (quasi-logical constructions nested in an inferential structure) from the multiplicity of our ways of understanding the natural phenomenon that is human life. It is committed to the idea that conceptions and inferences (or, the elements of truth-bearers) are not the actuality (the truth makers) that make them true (Armstrong 2004) and that we should not mistake what lies in the means of representation for what lies in the thing itself. This distinction between essence and existence, when applied to debates about personal

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identity, confounds most varieties of essentialism and favors a mindfulness about the gap between representation and reality that allows something to be indefinable provided that we can track the actuality being discussed through its various modes of presentation.

The essence of human identity in the views under discussion is taken to be either:
1. a set of psychological states that are related in some principled way, for example, “links of memory (or, rather, apparent memory), continued beliefs, desires, projects, emotions” and so on (Beck 2013, 34) or
2. a narrative thread or continuity of voice, an authorial/editorial function unifying experiences—“sense of self involves seeing experiences and actions as part of an intelligible whole” (Beck 2013, 34).

For the psychological theorists Beck defends, the links in 1 are based in:

a causal process that is doing the work for identity (38) [comprising] causal connections between experiences and (apparent) memories... continuing beliefs, desires, intentions and so on which will under certain conditions be causally effective with other beliefs, desires and experiences and will sometimes be unactivated dispositions. (Beck 2013, 38)

I will (i) critique the adequacy of the causal, psychological connectedness view, (ii) deny that the critique of the narrative view touches a neuroethical (real essence) view, and (iii) offer some remarks on the forensic relevance of the neuroethical view.

Beck’s causal view assumes that the link between thoughts and behavior is causal, but that thesis is a highly suspect and, some would argue, unsustainable view, in that thoughts are essentially constructions of meaning that act through their role in discourse and causes are brute forces of nature. It follows that causality cannot be the basis of the effect of reasons on behavior unless one accepts a (materialistic) metaphysics of mind that is, arguably, deeply suspect for several reasons (Gillett 1992, 2009). For instance, one might notice that to allow a reason to shape your action is not to undergo a mental event that can stand in a bringing-about relation to a bodily event but rather to adjust 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. That is not reductively explicable causal production (unless one is prepared to make some significant metaphysical assumptions). The integrity (akin to that argued for by Schechtman) equips a human subject with a cognitive unity adequate to form certain beliefs and intentions and allows the use of a range of discursive skills to create a ‘good enough’ narrative, the coherence of which is not necessarily transparent to the subject concerned (Gillett 2008). Each requirement can be argued for, although, as Beck points out, Schechtman does not do so as clearly as one might like.

ARGUMENT FOR THE UNITARY COGNITIVE SUBJECT

The cognitive subject is the subject who performs cognitive operations involving (a) the use of concepts and (b) the making of logical inferences. The use of concepts is, one can argue, a skill exercised by psychological beings that enables them to classify and categorize—or find the commonalities between—different presentations (or stimulus arrays). The skill is principled and internally related to the inferential structure of cognition in that it obeys certain logical constraints governing permitted cognitive operations. So to detail the argument as a plausible naturalistic syllogism:

US₁: The argument for the unity of the cognitive subject.

Let the cognitive subject at time \( t₀ \) be \( S_c^{t₀} \).

US₁: \( S_c \) learns concept \( C \) in situations occurring at \( t₁, t₂, t₃, \ldots t' \).

US₂: \( S_c \) uses concept \( C \) in giving content to experience at \( t' \).

Therefore

US₃: \( S_c \) is the same individual as \( S_c^{t₁}, S_c^{t₂}, S_c^{t₃}, \ldots \). and so on.

Given US₃, one can make valid conclusions about univocality of concepts as used by the same subject at different times, the ability of the subject to form and refine clear and distinct ideas that track the truth and to draw valid inferences from premises already held, the ability to form meaningful intentions, and so on. The argument yields
the unity of voice or cognition needed to shape a narrative. The second argument is like unto it.

**USₙ**₁: Argument for the unitary narrative subject.

Let the narrative subject at time \( t^0 \) be \( Sₙ^{t^0} \).

**USₙ**₂. Human memory in the natural world is not \( Q \) memory.

**USₙ**₃. Any human subject \( Sₙ^{t^2} \) is the same human subject as \( Sₙ^{t^1} \).

**USₙ**₄. Therefore, there is a relation of narrative identity between \( Sₙ^{t^2} \) and \( Sₙ^{t^1} \).

**USₙ**₂ is argued by Marya Schechtman on the basis of the cognitive neuroscience of memory, drawing on which she suggests that an episodic memory is not merely causally connected to the event remembered, but in fact is an elaborate reconstruction, using critical cue patterns on the basis of something much more like semantic memory (the cognitive faculty important in *The argument for the unity of the cognitive subject*) and evincing the cognitive integrity of the subject of the narrative. Semantic memory itself is cumulatively elaborated during the learning history of the psychological subject on the basis of actual interactions with a succession of stimulus situations (that have selectively been represented in conscious memory).

These two arguments somewhat undermine Beck’s claim that narrative theory (at least in Schechtman’s terms) does not add anything to psychological connectedness and continuity. However, it is true that the quality of the narrative or the authorial/editorial unity can be a matter of degree, even though its unity rests on the necessary cognitive unity within a single learning history (required for the composition of coherent mental content).

Even though a strong Schechtman style characterization view (as might be involved in a conscious or developed intention to integrate oneself) can be challenged, a ‘good enough’ narrative of the type sketched obeys flexible requirements of truth and answerability and is sufficient to tie together *actus reus* and *mens rea* in a way that explains why certain things happen in the world and warrant the kinds of forensic attributions that we all make in our dealings with others. To be more prescriptive than that is to force multifaceted human reality into a kind of tidy (essentialist) philosophy of mind that is unrealistic. We, therefore, have juries and judges (rather than consulting metaphysicians) to settle questions of forensic identity.

(ii) Functionalist psychological connectedness theorists either complain about the subjectivity of narratives or, as Beck does, argue that they do not add anything to the more down-to-earth (potentially reductive) functional story, but the arguments for cognitive and narrative unity undermine functionalism of that (reductive friendly) kind. Another (non-Beck, anti-narrative) complaint draws a similar response:

there must be a criterion for qualifying as a proper or essential part of your story. It may not be simple or straightforward to state. But there should be at least some sort of answer to the question of whether this or that event or episode is part of your tale. But there is none. (Graham 2010)

There is ‘some sort of answer’ in that this or that episode is part of my narrative depending on the state of mind that I was in at the time, what happened to me, and the repercussions of the events in my life and memory. The connections may be symbolic or meaningful, and the fact that things were done to my body may be essential to the story or it may not. I could conceive of a great harm done me by attributing what I said to someone else or vice versa (‘identity theft’ or ‘shady deals in cattle ranching,’ for instance). These events may not be part of my narrative even though they affect me (in a nonsubjective way perhaps), so that the fact of my becoming aware of the relevant events in some way is perhaps better as a (psychological) criterion for being an aspect of my lived identity. But hidden scars and ethnic atrocities affecting me through convoluted paths of discourse and meaning force *ceteris paribus* clauses to be linked to that claim and, in the end, may cause it to ‘die the death of a thousand qualifications’ or at least look very ‘fuzzy/vague.’

Bits of my story may be evident to others but not to me, and I may be affected by them in ways I do not understand; however, it is important that my story is both embodied and situated and therefore unavoidably relational in such a way that a
theory that is more holistic than a psychological continuity theory may be needed to say what it is to be a subjective ‘somebody’ around here.

The neuroethical or holistic view takes seriously the impingements of contingency on me as an embodied subject and allows my psychological states to be both distinctive and open-ended as the result of my lived human life as somebody somewhere. The psychiatric adage ‘psychology is history,’ Nietzsche’s claim that psychology should be seen as “the morphology and development-doctrine of the will to power” (1886, #23), and Foucault’s claim that the soul is “the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body” (1984, 176) yield an understanding of human psychology and psychopathology that does not lead us to construct an idealized essential self into which any given episode of life history can be unambiguously fitted. There is vagueness in the specification of the essential me because of the dynamic and shifting flux of narrative flow in the psyche just as there is a vagueness in my physical constitution because of the dynamic and fragile anti-entropic steady state that is my physical body. Neither of these sources of vagueness radically unsettle our normal processes of naming people and settling forensic disputes, even though the judgments involved both resist formalizations.

The neuroethical self is holistic and psychosomatic, and can neither be shoe-horned into an intentional narrative view nor into a psychological continuity view of essence. In this respect, neuroethics harks back to Peter Strawson of Individuals and Maurice Merleau-Ponty of Phenomenology of perception. It is open-ended and complex, based in the domain wherein we live and encounter other truth-makers and not fully captured by the domain of truth-bearers, but then it takes a certain mindset to realize that metaphysics and its prepackaged world are both human constructions.

Note
1. As taken in my Subjectivity and Being Somebody (2008).

References