Misunderstandings Understood

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Simon Beck offers a series of insightful challenges to an earlier paper in which I argue for a self-understanding, or narrative, view of personal identity (Schechtman 2005). His objections have shown me that my earlier paper conflates two issues that, although connected, are not connected in the straightforward way I implied. One is the claim that narrative views, unlike psychological theories, capture what is compelling in Locke’s account of personal identity. What draws us to Locke’s approach is the intuition that personal continuation is at bottom a phenomenological fact. I suggest that psychological continuity theorists’ development of the notion of ‘sameness of consciousness’ in terms of the contents of consciousness loses this phenomenological connection. The other claim is that psychological continuity theorists’ development of the notion of ‘sameness of consciousness’ in terms of the contents of consciousness loses this phenomenological connection. The other claim is that the narrative approach can avoid an objection that would seem to apply to any view that does capture the intuitive appeal of Locke’s account, that it has difficulty making sense of the attribution of non-conscious psychological states.

In my earlier paper, I suggested that the capacity to account for non-conscious states was an advantage that the narrative view has over psychological theories. This is misleading. Psychological theories in many ways have an easier time attributing non-conscious states than the narrative view does, but they do so at the cost of giving up the appeal of Locke’s phenomenological account. The advantage of the narrative view is thus that it can explain the attribution of non-conscious psychological states while capturing the Lockean insight that personal identity should be defined in phenomenological terms. Because the bulk of Beck’s discussion concerns my reading of the psychological approach, I concentrate primarily on my objections to that view in what follows.

One of the central arguments Beck makes against my analysis is that it aims to solve a problem that does not exist. Psychological theorists are not trying to capture the Lockean perspective, he says, so the fact that they fail to do so is not a genuine demerit. Locke is arguing against substantialist views of personal identity, whereas psychological continuity theories have the quite different goal of arguing against anti-reductionist views. This is a bit too quick, however. Psychological theorists must defend not only against anti-reductionists, but also against biological accounts of identity (which have enjoyed a strong resurgence in recent ‘animalist’ accounts; see, e.g., Olson 1997) Locke argues for a psychological approach by asking us to reflect on hypothetical cases like that of the prince whose consciousness enters the body of a cobbler. In this case, he says, we will judge that the person goes where the consciousness goes. Anticipating such a switch, the prince would anticipate having future experience in the cobbler’s body rather than in the one he now inhabits. It
is the pains and pleasures of the cobbler’s body rather than the princely one that he will feel after the transfer takes place. It is this phenomenological connection to future experience that makes for personal identity on Locke’s view.

Locke also asks us to reflect on questions about the justice of punishment and reward. I disagree with Beck’s assessment that Locke’s insistence that ‘person’ is a forensic term amounts only to the assertion that “it has special significance in a legal context” (Beck 2013, 40). Locke focuses as much on self-interested concern as on responsibility, and sees the two as inherently linked. To be an agent one must be capable of a law, and this requires that one be able to experience pleasure or pain, care which one experiences, and understand that the quality of present experience is contingent upon past actions.

Psychological theorists use Lockean thought experiments to argue for a psychological approach and to this extent are obligated to include those features of Locke’s account that follow from it. My claim is that they fail to do this. Overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness do not in themselves guarantee a phenomenological connection between persons at two different times, only a certain kind of likeness or continuity in the contents of consciousness. The fact that some future person’s psychological states are like mine, or like mine could have gradually become, says nothing about whether I will experience what happens to her. This is the basis of the objection to the psychological theory, which Derek Parfit calls the Extreme Claim, (1984, 307–12). Parfit, whose view Beck calls the “archetypal psychological account” (Beck 2013, 37–8), embraces this result and uses it as an argument for Utilitarian ethics (Parfit 1984, 330–47). This, however, concedes the very point that made a psychological account attractive in the first place, or so I argue.

Beck’s suggestion that the picture the psychological view paints is not unlike my own “except that it uses causation as its glue rather than meaning and understanding” (Beck 2013, 38). He allows that self-monitoring is crucial on this picture too, “but it is a causal process, an internal form of perception which is itself a causal process” (Beck 2013, 38). I am not entirely clear on just what is being asserted or, more to the point, denied. A key may be found in Beck’s suggestion that Locke’s talk of appropriation “describes a connection, not an activity” (Beck 2013, 40). I do not see the justification for this reading. Perhaps Beck is trying to stave off an implausibly strong picture that
requires self-consciously putting a label of ‘mine-
ness’ on each of my experiences. This is not the
reading of appropriation I urge, but neither do I
think appropriation can be a passive connection.
The idea of the narrative view is that the kind of
psychological causation Beck describes has an ac-
tive component. Moving from values, beliefs, and
desires to intentions and new beliefs is something
I do, not merely something that happens within
me. This does not mean that at every moment I am
self-consciously directing the transition between
psychological states. It does, however, mean that
I implicitly monitor the intelligibility of these
transitions and self-consciously deliberate or in-
terpret where conflict threatens. This monitoring,
according to the narrative view, has a peculiar
phenomenology—the experience of oneself as a
unified subject.

In the original paper, I pointed to the notion of
the “perceiver observer” employed by Ray Martin
as an example of this kind of experience (Schecht-
man 2005, 18–9). Another example can be found
in the characterization of the phenomenology of
deliberation provided by Christine Korsgaard,
who tells us:

[It] may be that what actually happens when you make
a choice is that the strongest of your conflicting desires
wins. But that is not the way you think of it when you
deliberate. When you deliberate it is as if there were
something over and above all of your desires, some-
thing that is you, and that chooses which one to act
on. (1989, 111)

It is not only in circumstances of deliberation that
we have this experience. Developmental psycholo-
gist Katherine Nelson describes the way in which
preschoolers learn to actively narrate the events
of the day, including their psychological states,
choices, and affective reactions. In this process,
the child learns to make sense of what happens
to her—to see how what she experiences, leads to
what she feels, how what she feels leads to what
she does, how what she does has predictable con-
sequences, and so on. The child learns to actively
interpret the passing flow of states and events,
subject it to norms of intelligibility, and, at least
to some extent, direct it to meet those norms.

Mastering these capacities, Nelson says, has
a profound impact on the experience of self and
the development of self-consciousness. In the
late preschool years, we see the emergence of a
“new subjective level of conscious awareness,
with a sense of a specific past and awareness of a
possible future, as well as with new insight into
the consciousness of other people” (2003, 33).
She finds a “close connection between narra-
tive and the emergence of a specifically human
level of consciousness” (Nelson 2003, 22). As we
mature, this kind of self-interpretation and self-
direction becomes largely automatic, although
self-conscious planning, reflection, and deliber-
ation are also regular parts of our lives. This is not
to deny that there are causal processes underlying
the development of narrative capacity. What is
crucial is that once this capacity has developed
psychological life is not simply a procession of
causally connected psychological events; it is also
an active interpretation, evaluation, and direc-
tion of those events, which yields an experience
of oneself as a continuing being. The appeal of a
broadly psychological picture of identity, I argue,
comes from the assumption that identity involves
the continuation of this self-experience and not
just a causally related stream of states.

This analysis helps to show not only the basis
of my complaint against psychological theories,
but also the basis of my claim that the narrative
account, although phenomenologically based, can
make sense of the attribution of non-conscious
states. The relevant phenomenological feature is
the sense of self that results from imposing norms
of intelligibility on one’s life. To the extent that
non-conscious states exert a causal influence on the
flow of psychological states, they are in a position
to trouble self-interpretation, and so to disturb
the experience of unity. This has a direct impact on
identity in the ways described in the original paper.

I have by no means answered all of the wor-
dies Beck raises, but perhaps I have shown how
I can avoid some, and clarified the nature of our
disagreement. I should also be clear that I do not
think this analysis shows the narrative view to be
the correct account of personal identity. My claim
is that Locke isolates one important intuition
about identity, which the narrative view expresses
in developed form. There are other intuitions pull-
ing us in different directions, and ultimately we
need to understand how these can be integrated with those Locke uncovers. This requires further reflection on the ways in which narratives are embedded in bodies in worlds. But this is a project for another day.

References