

What Is Constituted in Self-Constitution?

Logi Gunnarsson, Berlin

1. Two senses of personal identity

A subject who has a self-transformation behind herself—say, a conversion to Catholicism—may say of herself “before transforming myself, I was a different person”. How are we to understand such a claim? Obviously, there is a sense in which the subject takes herself to be the same as before and another sense in which she considers herself to be somebody else now. One possible way of understanding it would be the following: Despite the *change* involved in the self-transformation, there is *enough similarity* between the pre-conversion subject—S1—and the converted subject—S2—to say that they are numerically identical. And there is enough difference for the subject to speak of herself before the self-transformation as another person.

In my view, such an explanation of the preservation of personal identity in self-transformation is entirely misguided. Consider belief-revision as an example of self-transformation. A subject’s revision of her own belief should not be thought of as a change which is a “minus-point” with respect to the persistence of the subject—a “minus-point” that must be outweighed by enough similarity over time if the subject is to persist. On the contrary, by revising her beliefs, a subject *maintains her identity* over time (just as she would maintain her identity by sustaining her beliefs). In other words, the process of belief-revision—and, more generally, self-transformation—is a process in which a subject *maintains* her own identity *irrespective* of whether S1 is similar to S2 or whether S2 identifies with S1 (or S1 identifies with S2) etc.

This means that a proper understanding of self-transformation requires a distinction between two senses of personal identity. In one sense—call it “subject-identity”—the subject maintains her own identity across the change irrespective of the dimension of the change. In another sense—call it “self-identity”—the change is the end of one self and the birth of another. It would require more argument to show that self-transformation requires a distinction between two such senses of personal identity. In this paper, I will simply rely on this distinction to argue that subject-identity and self-identity cannot be constituted by the same kind of activity and that this poses a problem for self-constitution views of personal identity. (Self-constitution theorists often use the ambiguous word “person”, but I avoid it precisely in order to keep the two senses of identity distinct.) In the following, I shall focus on Marya Schechtman’s self-constitution view, but the criticism applies more widely.¹

2. Schechtman’s self-constitution view

In the second part of her *The Constitution of Selves*, Schechtman is concerned with what she calls “the characterization question”. “[T]his question asks which actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on (hereafter abbreviated ‘characteristics’) are to be attributed to a given person” (Schechtman 1996,

73; subsequent references given by page number only). Schechtman distinguishes this question from “the reidentification question”, “the question of what makes a person at time t_2 the same person as a person at time t_1 ” (1-2). She says that, in its most common form, the characterization question is “which characteristics are *truly* those of some person” (73) and that the question “concerns the kind of identity that is at issue in an ‘identity crisis’” (74). However, she says that the characterization question does not only ask which characteristics truly belong to a person but also which characteristics are a part of the history of a person at all. In fact, she says that “there is a single question—the question of whether a particular characteristic is attributable to a particular person—the answer to which admits of degrees” (76). In other words, the difference between belonging truly to a person and belonging merely to the history of a person is a *matter of degree*.

Before turning to the self-constitution view itself, I should stress that the distinction between subject-identity and self-identity cuts across Schechtman’s distinction between the reidentification question and the characterization question. One can ask both questions about subject-identity as well as self-identity: One can ask what makes something the same person at two different times (the reidentification question) and what makes something the characteristic of a particular person (the characterization question), irrespective of whether “person” is taken to mean *subject* or *self*.

Schechtman defends an answer to the characterization question which she calls “the narrative self-constitution view”:

According to the narrative self-constitution view, the difference between persons and other individuals (I use the word ‘individual’ to refer to any sentient creature) lies in how they organize their experience, and hence their lives. At the core of this view is the assertion that individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs. Some, but not all, individuals weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons. On this view a person’s *identity* (in the sense at issue in the characterization question) is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers. (94)

Consider first “the assertion that individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future, taking certain experiences as theirs”. One part of this claim is that “individuals constitute themselves as persons by coming to think of themselves” in a certain way. But what does it mean to say that individuals come to think of themselves in a certain way? One possible interpretation would be that these individuals are already able to *think of themselves as themselves*—that they already have a first-person point of view—and then by coming to think of themselves *in a certain specific way* constitute themselves as persons (or, in my

¹ For reference to other self-constitution theories, see Schechtman 1996, 93. To her list, one should add Korsgaard 1989, 1996 and 1999 to which my criticism also applies.

terminology, as subjects). Although I cannot argue this here, if Schechtman's assertion is understood in this way, it is unacceptable. If one already has a first-person point of view, then one is already a subject and nothing more is needed to make one a subject.

However, there is another possible interpretation. Schechtman's claim might be that thinking of oneself as oneself—having a first-person point of view—is only possible if one also thinks of oneself in a certain specific way. In other words, being able to think of oneself as oneself *at all* is not possible without being able to think of oneself in a certain way. But in what way? Schechtman's general answer is that persons "think of themselves as persisting subjects who have had experience in the past and will continue to have experience in the future". Her central and more specific answer is that to think of themselves in this way requires that persons "weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons". In other words, thinking of oneself in the required way is to have "a self-conception that is narrative in form" (96).

I agree with Schechtman that, to be able to think of oneself as oneself at all, one must be *active* in some way. It is a further question whether this activity must be understood as somehow involving *weaving stories*. However, this is not a question I want to settle here. My topic is not what makes an individual a subject in the first place, but rather what makes a subject be the same subject over time and what makes a future or past mental state be the mental state of the present subject. Here Schechtman's answer is that "a person's *identity* (in the sense at issue in the characterization question) is constituted by the content of her self-narrative, and the traits, actions, and experiences included in it are, by virtue of that inclusion, hers". In other words, those future and past mental states which are included in a self-narrative belong to the person who is the "self" of the self-narrative. I shall argue that this answer fails as an account of subject-identity, though it may partially succeed for self-identity.

3. What is being constituted and how?

Schechtman works the basic idea I just described into a nuanced and complex view. Here I will only mention two ways in which she qualifies the bold statement that characteristics belong to a person by inclusion in a self-narrative. First, to avoid assuming that a characteristic belongs to a person simply because it is part of a person's self-conception—to avoid assuming that a person cannot be mistaken about herself—she introduces constraints on what can count as an identity-constituting narrative (94-95). Here I will not discuss what these constraints are. Second, to (among other things) explain how unconscious mental states can belong to a person, she says that there may be *implicit* as well as explicit self-narratives. "The implicit narrative is understood as the psychological organization from which his experience and actions are actually flowing" (115). Schechtman knows that this notion of an implicit narrative seems to diverge from the usual meaning of "self-narrative". She responds by saying that her talk of self-narratives is merely meant to make clear that "the psychological forces constituting identity are dynamic and active—things a person *does*—rather than static and passive features she *has*" (117).

What does it mean to say that a psychological organization is somehow the person's doing? One can give the claim two different senses. Consider first an ordinary case in which a subject revises a belief on the basis of new information or experience. In doing so, the

person is not only changing her belief but also her "psychological organization": Her old belief having been causally and normatively connected to other psychological states of hers, in revising her belief, the subject needs to consider how the new belief fits to her other commitments. In other words, the subject needs to organize herself psychologically anew. Since the mental states with which the relevant beliefs are connected are themselves connected with other states, I simply assume here that all the psychological states of a person form one *elementary unity*.

Second, we can understand the organization Schechtman talks about as something imposed by the subject on the already existing elementary unity. This organization distinguishes between those members of the elementary unity which are connected in a certain way—for example by inclusion in a narrative—and those that lie outside of this organization. We might say that this is a way of distinguishing between *more and less central elements* of the elementary unity.

The two senses are significantly different. When a subject adopts a certain belief on the basis of her other mental states, she is maintaining her psychological organization in the first sense. However, simply by adopting the belief, the subject has done nothing to decide whether this belief is central among the mental states, whether it is important with respect to the unfolding of the subject's life. Thus, the subject has done nothing to decide whether this belief is part of "the psychological organization from which his experience and actions are actually flowing" if this psychological organization is understood in the second sense.

If this is correct, something important follows for the self-constitution view. According to Schechtman, something the person *does* decides whether a characteristic belongs to her or not. Let us say that what the person does is "narratively organizing" her life. If what I have said is correct, Schechtman must decide whether she wants "narratively organizing" to be what the subject does in the first kind of case or whether she wants it to be what the subject does in the second kind of case. If I am right, to "narratively organize" cannot mean the same in both cases. *If it meant the same, then to "narratively organize" in the first sense would suffice for psychological organization in the second sense. But it does not suffice. Thus, the two senses must be distinct.*

By "narratively organizing" in the first sense one is—in my terminology—maintaining subject-identity, whereas by "narratively organizing" in the second sense one is defining one's self-identity. Any defender of a self-constitution view must decide whether whatever it is that the subject *does* to constitute herself is to be understood in the *subject-constitution* sense (the first sense) or the *self-constitution* sense (the second sense). Now Schechtman could choose to use "narratively organizing" in the subject-constitution sense. However, it seems to me that, if the notion of a *narrative* is to play a significant role in her account, she should opt for the self-constitution sense. She says that "[t]o have an autobiographical narrative in the relevant sense is . . . to have an implicit understanding of one's history as unfolding according to the logic of the story of a person's life" (113-114). It seems to me that in simply adopting a certain belief and thus maintaining one's identity, one need not be acting in accordance with such an implicit understanding. However, when one sorts one's mental states according to their importance in one's life, one is precisely acting in accordance with such an understanding.

Of course, defenders of self-constitution views could specify two kinds of activities, one for subject-constitution and the other for self-constitution. However, like Schechtman, most defenders of self-constitution views do not distinguish between subject-identity and self-identity and defend their views for a kind of activity which seems only capable of the constitution of self-identity. These self-constitution views thus face a dilemma: *Either* they must give up the claim to be offering a general theory of personal identity *or* they must explain what kind of activity is responsible for subject-constitution as opposed to self-constitution.

References

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