

EMPATHY & NARRATIVE

M. SCHECHTMAN'S CONTRIBUTION

Identity & Literature (Summer 2013)

Laura Guidry-Grimes

Puzzle of Psychological Continuation

- Need an account of personal identity that can “define the difference between ordinary personal development and identity-destroying psychological discontinuity” (239)
- *At what point* do alterations, disruptions, and jarring in mental life threaten personal survival?
 - Problem cases: brainwashing, conversions, amnesia

Types of Personal Survival

- **Basic survival**
 - ▣ Metaphysical, numerical, (perhaps) all-or-nothing
 - ▣ Not affected by significant psychological changes (serious matron and party girl are the same person)

- **Subtle survival**
 - ▣ “most deeply intermeshed with the many significant practical implications of personal continuation” (241)
 - ▣ Sensitive to radical psychological changes (serious matron and party girl might not be the same person) – matter of degree

Narrative Views

- “actions, events and experiences are made part of a single life by being bound together in an intelligible life story” (243)
 - ▣ “individual elements of a person’s life gain their meaning—indeed their very content—from the broader context in which they occur” (243)
- Our mental lives are not *atomistic* –beliefs, desires, and values are deeply connected

Problems for Narrative Views

- *Criteria for a successful narrative?*
 - ▣ Intelligibility, coherence, sufficiently matches up with reality

- *Comprehensible narrative does not guarantee identity?*
 - ▣ “there can be intelligible stories of how someone loses his or her identity” (244)

- Does the **abruptness** or the **intelligibility** of psychological change make a difference for personal survival?
 - ▣ Or something else?

The Matron & the Party Girl

- **Serious matron**
 - Retains *memories* of party girl
 - But affectively and imaginatively closed off from her: “she cannot recapture the passions, emotions, likes and dislikes that she once felt” (245)
 - Feels *indifference* toward the party girl

- **Somewhat-less-serious matron**
 - Retains memories *and* has **empathic access** to her
 - Affects her current life choices, behavior, consciousness
 - Feels *something*—happy nostalgia, mortification—toward the party girl

Empathic Access

- “more than just cognitive recollection” (246)
 - ▣ Requires more than simply describing past events and actions
- Experiencing the beliefs, values, desires, and passions of prior self
 - ▣ Informs current decision-making
- Ability to imaginatively put yourself in the shoes of the past individual

Empathic Access

- *Perfect* retention of memory and emotional connection not required
- Need to be able to recall (to some degree) past thoughts and feelings from a first-person perspective AND “a fundamental sympathy for the states which are recalled in this way” (251)
 - “at least a limited adoption of the objectives of the person whose feelings, thoughts and emotions are shared” (251)
- **Necessary** for (subtle) survival, not sufficient
 - In combination with **narrative view**

Questions

- Are Schechtman's critiques of standard psychological continuity views and narrative views compelling?
- Do you agree that most of our prudential interests are tied to subtle survival, not basic?
- What are some potential problems for making empathic access a *necessary* element of personal identity?
 - ▣ Are there cases where someone could lack empathic access to a past "self" but still survive (in the subtle sense) the passing of time?

Questions? Comments?