

## Philosophical Profiles

### Marya Schechtman

Professor of Philosophy and a member of the Laboratory of Integrated Neuroscience at the University of Illinois at Chicago

#### IN BRIEF

Marya Schechtman is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where she is also a member of the Laboratory of Integrated Neuroscience. She got her Ph.D. in Philosophy at Harvard, and her dissertation on personal identity became her first book, *The Constitution of Selves* (Cornell, 1996). In this work she argues that the dominant view of personal identity most famously defended by Sidney Shoemaker and modified by Derek Parfit, which takes the work of John Locke as inspiration, misses out a vital element of Locke's view. She defends what she calls The Narrative Self-Constitution View. This view became influential, and therefore a target for criticism, from the burgeoning animalist movement in the philosophy of personal identity on one side, and from what the philosopher Galen Strawson calls "episodics" on the other. In her new book, *Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of Life* (Oxford, 2014), she responds to the critiques and advances the Person Life View, which takes persons as essentially situated within cultures.

#### DETAILS

Simon Cushing conducted the following interview with Marya Schechtman on 24 June 2015.

#### CITATION

Schechtman, Marya. 2015. "Interview by Simon Cushing." *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* (Philosophical Profiles): 1–31.

# Marya Schechtman

## a philosophical profile

### **SC: How did you get into philosophy in the first place?**

MS: You know, I think I was always interested in philosophy, and the reason I think this is because actually just a while ago while cleaning out some boxes found the Socratic dialogue that I wrote in first grade, although it wasn't very Socratic and I didn't know what I was doing. But I majored in philosophy in college and the way I chose that major was twofold. The first was: I couldn't decide between a lot of the things that I wanted to study and it felt to me like philosophy was a discipline where I could study all of them, or move between them, which has turned out to be in some ways true and in some ways not, but it worked out that way. And the other thing was that I was considering an English major, and I had a quarter in which in English I had to read ten Dickens novels that were this thick in my English class, and then they read the Meditations, which is this big, in my philosophy class. And it turned out that I read much better this way than this way, and so I realized that what I was interested in literature was the kind of thematic stuff that I could get at more directly in philosophy, and that put me over the edge and I never looked back.

**I think that must be a common experience because you have to like reading, but then an awful lot of English is "the plosive-ness of the "P" indicates the..." and it's like, where are you getting this stuff?**

Also, I'm just a slow reader.

**Maybe philosophers are just slow readers.**

Well, there have to be some of us.

### **So what was your dissertation on?**

My dissertation was on personal identity, the topic I am still working on. Actually my dissertation had the same title as my first book. And I got to the topic in pretty much the same way as I got to philosophy, just by one day realizing that was what I was interested in. And in this case it got to the point in graduate school where everybody else had chosen a topic but me in my class and I was getting frantic. So I took a weekend and said I'm going to figure out what I'm going to write on. And I looked over all the papers I had written for coursework and they were all on personal identity, no matter what the class was. And that's what I started working on, and it turns out to have been complicated enough and hard enough that I'm still working on it decades later.

**There was a time there when it seemed to have hit a bit of a dead end, at least I thought so, post-Parfit. But certainly this animalism has opened up a whole new vista. And of course, there are problems with Parfit. So what do you think drew you**

**to the topic in the first place? When was your first encounter with the issue? Was it just something you'd always wrestled with, or was it a particular moment when you encountered this issue, and it spoke to you?**

I think it was something I had always wrestled with in one form or another, and I think it's one of the things that's great about the topic is: it's a question that a lot of people wrestle with, and wrestle with in a lot of different ways. I mean, that's one of the things that's so interesting and also so frustrating is you could be talking about completely different things. Most people think when you're thinking about personal identity you mean something like your social identity or the identity of identity politics, or your most firmly held beliefs, and so on. But in philosophy, there's this basic question of "is that entity the same entity in the future as the one sitting here talking to you now?" But I worried a lot about mortality when I was young, and I think that the personal identity question ties so directly, especially in its origins and to that question, about what does it mean for me to survive, what kinds of changes could I survive, what does it mean for me to be there in the future, what do I really care about anyway? So I was always interested in those questions, and then I had a really good class on Locke that had a really good discussion of Locke and personal identity, and I found that very congenial and interesting. And then as it turned out, right place right time. There was a whole lot going on in the philosophy of personal identity right around when I was in graduate school. And then *Reasons and Persons* came out just around then and we had a reading group on it. And the way I got launched on the dissertation was I was presenting on personal identity, the first chapters in *Reasons and Persons*, in our reading group in graduate school, which is a faculty-student reading group, and I just read this stuff, and I just thought it was wacky. And I said to someone I respected very much: "I don't think anyone could believe this." And he said: "I don't know, I think it's really important stuff." And I thought, "Maybe I missed something." And I went back and said, "No, clearly no one could believe this." And I tried to articulate why this was completely wrong. And as so often happens, it turned out to be a lot smarter and deeper than I thought, so it took a lot of years, and it no longer seems wacky to me, and it seems to me like there's something very important going on there, but I still disagree. But at the time there was just this frustration with not being able to articulate what seemed to me to be so clearly wrong with it, plus the fact that people I trusted had a much different reception.

**I think there are a lot of puzzles in philosophy like that. People have that with Epicurus' argument that death cannot harm you.**

Right, of course it happens—I found thinking: well, am I in the position in the students I teach when I go in and tell them that after years of careful study I believe is really problematic, and they just shrug their shoulders and say, "no it isn't."

**I remember as an undergraduate, I think it was Jonathan Glover was giving us a lecture and the example that he used that has stuck with me, that was the one that pulled the rug from out underneath you just after you had been kind of sold on the continuity of consciousness account, the idea that if you remember being something than you are that person, so would you use the Star Trek transporter? And everybody says yes. And he tells the example of: you get in the transporter, you press the button, nothing appears to happen, but you see on the view screen you getting out of the booth on the other end and then suddenly it says "disintegration**

“*Reasons and Persons* came out just around then and we had a reading group on it. And the way I got launched on the dissertation was I was presenting on personal identity, the first chapters in *Reasons and Persons*, in our reading group in graduate school, which is a faculty-student reading group, and I just read this stuff, and I just thought it was wacky. And I said to someone I respected very much: "I don't think anyone could believe this." And he said: "I don't know, I think it's really important stuff." And I thought, "Maybe I missed something." And I went back and said, "No, clearly no one could believe this.””

## Philosophical Profiles

**this end temporarily delayed, we'll begin in 5...4..." and suddenly everyone's "Wait a minute, it didn't work before, I've been dying every time!" So I think it is a case where your intuitions can be certainly prodded and poked in different directions.**

I'm still struggling with that particular case. I still think to say what the difference is there is still really hard. And I think Parfit was the one who said, who so clearly articulated why.

**I think Parfit is valuable to people who are prepared to just bite the bullet and go whole-hog and go "I'm committed to this view." And he says it so nicely as well. His phrase..."I used to think I was in a glass tunnel..."**

"...going toward my death."

**And I like how he writes all this very dense analytic philosophy and at the end he says "Well, basically it's Buddhism."**

He has a two second thing that says, "Wittgenstein would have agreed and so would Buddha." And therefore he thinks it's true as he hopes it's true for all people at all time.

**Right, right. I'm not sure that follows. Now you said that you started with as so many people do, with a discussion with Locke's discussion of personal identity. Now you have a slightly different take from the usual on Locke's contribution. Do you want to say a little bit about that?**

A little bit about my first different take, or my second?

**Well, both would be good.**

Schectman: I think at least that Locke is the source and it's always hard to disentangle in your head the source where it started in philosophy and the source where it started for you. But certainly for me Locke is the place where the idea that the metaphysical fact of personal identity is tied to practical consideration is straightforwardly put forward as a constraint on the theory of personal identity. So, basically, I see Locke as saying that what it is to be a person—he says person is a "forensic" term—and what he means by that, roughly, is that a person is someone you can hold responsible for his or her past actions, a person is someone who has a particular kind of concern for future well-being that's qualitatively different from others, even though concern for others can be greater, and that whatever relation we define personal identity the terms ought to illuminate, or at least support, these practices concerning people. That is, whatever makes me the same as some future person should help explain why I am responsible for my past actions and no one else is, and I have this special kind of concern. So that was how I understood Locke.

**Of course, for people who aren't familiar, for me one of the great things about the Locke discussion is it makes very short work for the two major candidates for personal identity. We're not our bodies and we're not our souls, and that's the part that a lot of people skim over but I love his little story about him meeting this "Christian Platonist" who claims to have the soul of Socrates and then he points out that he doesn't have any memories of Socrates, so we just think he has Socrates' soul we don't think he's**

“ I see Locke as saying that whatever makes me the same as some future person should help explain why I am responsible for my past actions and no one else is. ”

**Socrates and therefore soul and person are not the same. So that's what most people tend to get out of the Locke, they just get him dismissing these two alternatives and then coming up with this connectivity of consciousness view or usually, simply put, the memory view. If you remember being somebody then you are that person. That's what most people get out, and then this stuff about the forensic term comes later on in that discussion and by that point people thought that the important stuff has already happened. It's good because he's addressing questions like, is a man drunk the same as a man sober, and those things. And the other thing about Locke is that he gives us the first major science fiction examples in modern philosophy, like the prince and the cobbler, which I'm surprised the Wachowski siblings haven't made into a movie.**

Well the prince and the cobbler, strangely, involves the transfer of a soul—but Disney has done it in *Freaky Friday*. But the way I read Locke, it is true, so I should have said that, that the first thing people tend to take from Locke is that he gives us a relational view of personal identity rather than personal identity consisting in a continuation of any substance, whether it be your body or organism as we later come to say, or your soul—if there are such things as material souls—neither one of those is relevant, or neither one is necessary or sufficient for continuing what you need, as he says, the sameness of consciousness. The reason I bring up the forensic stuff, aside from the fact that I've been very interested in it, is that as I read him that's his justification for the sameness of consciousness view. He makes this distinction between *person* and *man*, and he says you can ask the question what makes you the same man (or the same human) or the question of what makes you the same person; those are different concepts and they'll have different criteria of identity. And I think Locke insists that person is a forensic term, in a very broad sense, because it's not only to do with personal responsibility and prudential concern but also to do with mortality, the question of survival, and (I am told by historians who work on Locke) the question of whether you might have a sullied soul that did something bad in previous times. That would mean that even if you live an exemplary life you might be punished by eternal torment for things you don't even know about. And (against that idea) he's saying don't worry if you don't remember it, it's not yours.

### **On the great Day of Judgment...**

And on that Day of Judgment God will know what you remember and what you don't. So the relational view is the metaphysical payoff, which I think he gets by linking the metaphysics to the practical.

**All of the intuition pumps, as Daniel Dennett says, that are used to push the relational view are things like: who should be punished? Or, who do you want to survive? And whenever you do this in a class you would say, "Which one of these do you care if they live or die?" Or: "Which one of these should be punished for that crime? Should it be the person with the body of the innocent person but the memory of the criminal, or vice versa?" And they always go with the consciousness. The intuition pumps always do refer back to practical considerations like punishment and desert and so on.**

## Philosophical Profiles

So the way that I diverge from the standard reading of Locke in my first book still is that, as you've been saying, Locke says it can't be the sameness of body and soul it has to be sameness of consciousness—well what's that? So you've got this problem with what it means to say I've had the same consciousness: he says if I have the same consciousness as Noah had at the flood then I'm Noah. Well, what does that mean for me to "have" Noah's consciousness? That's usually read as memory. Locke doesn't actually say that it's memory.

**No, and his view of memory is pretty weird as well. I remember reading it once and it seemed very ephemeral and untrustworthy.**

Right, and for good reason people have asked what it could mean for me to have consciousness of some past action—I'm only conscious of the present directly. So it must be to remember it: most people say that what Locke is really saying is that if you remember the actions of this person then you are the person, otherwise you're not. And you can get that intuition going by saying that if you have total amnesia and you can never recover any of this life from that future person, then you might as well be dead. If you knew that was going to happen to you, you would write goodbye notes to the people you love, and so on. Furthermore, for the afterlife kind of questions: would you rather have your soul stripped of any of the memories of your current life, or is there some other form of existence in which you remember everything that happened to you? That seems more like survival. Obviously there are a lot of problems with defining personal identity in terms of memory, which have been pointed out over the years. We misremember things all the time; we forget things that seem pretty clear that we did, and a host of other problems. What I argue is: I don't think that Locke really means to say that sameness of consciousness is constituted by remembering, or at least by remembering alone or always by remembering, although I think memory probably plays a huge role in it. But what he talks about is *appropriation* and what he talks about is *concern*. And so he talks about being concerned in past actions and he talks about appropriating them to myself. And when he talks about what is part of my consciousness in the present, it has to do with a kind of experiential or phenomenological component that has automatically to do with what I care about. So basically what he says is: one feature of consciousness is if you're conscious you can't help but care about the quality of your consciousness. You want it to be nice instead of nasty. So this present body is part of my consciousness because I feel what happens to it, therefore I care about it. If you put this hand in the heat, that's painful to me because my consciousness is affected by it, and this makes this my body now. I take him to be saying that we extend our consciousness to the past by being concerned with what happened in the past. Obviously I don't directly feel what happened to any past body in the sense that its aches and pains are mine. But I can in the sense that the quality of my present experience is determined by what happened to that past person in a very direct way, meaning that if I'm sitting here fuming about that thing that somebody said to me today at the faculty meeting, then it's the person that had that thing said to her in the faculty meeting who is affecting my current consciousness. So I see him as saying, roughly, because he thinks that personal identity has to do with responsibility and future-looking concern and so on, it's where that concern goes that extends consciousness. It's my appropriating past actions or experiences or antecedently appropriating provisional ones that makes them mine. So in a way I constitute myself—hence the title *Constitution of Selves*—we constitute ourselves by thinking of ourselves as persisting beings. And his first definition

“ What I argue is: I don't think that Locke really means to say that sameness of consciousness is constituted by remembering, what he talks about is *appropriation* and what he talks about is *concern*. And so he talks about being concerned in past actions and he talks about appropriating them to myself. And when he talks about what is part of my consciousness in the present, it has to do with a kind of experiential or phenomenological component that has automatically to do with what I care about. ”

## Marya Schechtman

of person is actually “a thinking, intelligent being who has reason and reflection and can consider itself in different times and places.” So he does say it has something to do with being aware of our persistence, which I think many people would accept as one of the defining features of creatures like us. That we, unlike other conscious creatures, have an awareness that we persist over time, that we can look forward to our futures, we anticipate and remember in a certain way. And so the argument is that it’s actually our appropriation of the past, there’s no pre-existing past and future—it’s a more complicated story than that, but until we appropriate the past and future they can’t affect us in the ways that are characteristic of persons.

**Of course the implication of this is that it’s the practical implications, really, that are driving this. The consciousness view is what results so we shouldn’t overcommit to the consciousness view and lose the practical considerations because the practical considerations for Locke, on your view, are what led him to that view, not the other way around. It’s not some kind of coincidence that he decided that we were what we remember, that there’s this connection of consciousness and then, by the way, that happens to coincide with practical considerations.**

Yes, it depends on how precise you are about how you define practical considerations. Because I do at least still agree with Locke in that there’s some conception of what we are that is connected to our being able to experience ourselves as continuing. And that in itself is a practical implication, “survival” is one of the things people talk about, our interest in survival, or what would satisfy us, or as Parfit would put it, what matters in survival. And whether that’s exactly practical consideration as moral responsibility and prudential concern is a different question.

**So would you say that there’s something essential about taking up a fairly extended span of time because that’s what we care about and in some sense that’s essential for being a person or for being the kind of being that we want to be?**

Yes. In the sense that I do think one of the places that I find Locke most compelling is that if you try to think of the contrast with beings that can have fairly sophisticated states of consciousness but that don’t, in one way or another, seem to have quite the sense of extension that we have.

**You mean people like Galen Strawson (who criticizes the narrative view of identity and argues that he is an “episodic” with very limited connection with the person who bore his name in the past and will in the future)?**

No, not people like Galen Strawson, who have a *perfectly good* extended sense of self, but we’ll get back to that later. People like, we presume, many of our pets and other creatures to be, or these people with Korsakoff Syndrome, who cannot retain anything in short term memory, and write in their diaries things like (as in the BBC special on Clive Wearing) “Now I awake for the first time, now I am awake for the first time.” It seems to me all of the things that we take to be special about persons, the idea that you distinguish personal identity as Locke did from vegetable identity, such that the identity of living things is one thing (distinct from the identity of persons), and for a living thing there are *biological* conditions of identity. And if you think that the identity of yourself is anything beyond that, if you think that there’s something more there that

## Philosophical Profiles

you're concerned about, that you would have continue even if the body didn't or that if the body continued it didn't, you would feel you were gone (that's the flip side of this), people who are in vegetative states or more or less controversially really in deep coma, and you just say "Okay, the person is gone; the shell is still there." If you want to say what the person is, I think capturing the notion of 'self' rather than 'person' has to be something that is able to experience itself, not just think of itself, but experience itself as persisting over time. That's the longer answer to your question.

**There's a question of terminology that maybe I should have introduced earlier, but maybe it would help with this, but could you say something about the distinction between the reidentification and the characterization question, because a lot of what you said presupposes that, but it's a helpful distinction that you usually put at the beginnings of your discussions.**

This is the thing that I figured out in my dissertation. A lot of the complexity or cross talk had to do with the fact that these two different notions of identity were being used interchangeably. They're both notions that philosophers like to talk about but in different spheres of philosophy. The reidentification issue is the one that metaphysicians take themselves frequently to be addressing, this question of "Is that one in the future the same thing, the same object, as the one here?" You can think of this as stemming from general identity problems like the Ship of Theseus where you've got a ship and you replace one plank and another and another; over twenty years there's no wood in common. Is the ship the same ship? If so, why? If not, why not? How quickly can you replace the planks, *et cetera*? You can generate a million puzzles there. The reidentification question is just that question for us. There's some—Eric Olson does not like this formulation of the question, I think we'll come back to that later too—but traditionally there's some person in the future, there's some person now—is the person in the future the same as the one now, are they identical to one another? Identity is a logical relation, it's reflexive, it's symmetric, transitive, all those things. It means "this equals that." So it's a question of numerical identity. Then, on the other hand, there's the *characterization* issue. A lot of what people talk about when they talk about personal identity is: "What do I truly believe? What do I truly want? What traits do I actually possess? Is this action truly an action of mine, or just something that happened through me?" So, in moral psychology and in action theory there's a lot of discussion of that sort and there's a lot of work to make the distinction between impulsively reaching for the thing without thinking about it—that's not something I did, but I plan to do that—that's something I did.

**And I think you can see something like this in the distinction between second-degree murder and first-degree murder, where we say it's much worse if it's premeditated, where you've obviously thought about it and it obviously came from the depths of you, whereas if you just got crazy and stabbed someone and said "Oh God what have I done?" it's not the same because it's not reflective of the real you. And therefore, for one thing, you're not really as dangerous—maybe we should worry about your angry spells, but your basic character isn't that of an evil scheming murderer.**

Something someone said to me offhand once at a job interview or something, which I've thought about a lot, is, he said, we make this distinction that way but really who are you more worried about: the person who wanted to get his uncle out of the way to get the

“ The reidentification issue is the one that metaphysicians take themselves frequently to be addressing, this question of “Is that one in the future the same thing, the same object, as the one here?” Then, on the other hand, there's the *characterization* issue. A lot of what people talk about when they talk about personal identity is: “What do I truly believe? What do I truly want? What traits do I actually possess? Is this action truly an action of mine, or just something that happened through me?” ”



## Marya Schechtman

inheritance and rationally and calmly did it or the guy, when he gets mad at you in a bar, stabs you to death? So, in some ways, you might say it's a more indicative—but that's another whole set of questions—of who you are.

**And it's certainly true that some murderers, once they've murdered that one person, that's it, they're not going to do it—and that person was a major source of torment in their life, and that's why they to get them out of the way. But they're not going to around murdering everyone else. The guy who stabs people in bars is dangerous; maybe not necessarily someone who should be punished, but just should be medicated.**

Right, but really what going on here is a dispute within the characterization question, because the person who said this to me said: "Why is first degree murder really worse than second degree murder when second degree murder shows you've got this tendency to fly off the handle and tend to get violent; and first degree murder shows that when there's a good reason for you?" It's not as simple as that, and I don't know the law well enough, but his analysis was that there's this Platonic sense of self that's being imported into law where your reason is the true you and your animal parts are not the true you, and he was saying: "Why shouldn't the animal parts be the true you?" So that's the question: what's the true you? And I don't know the answer to that question and I haven't answered it; certainly the predominant view is something like the former, that we're what we endorse, or reflect upon, or have reason to do. But in any event, the question there is not a question of reidentification; it's not a question of: are you really the person who committed that murder because you were so outraged and drunk when you did it that it's not typical for you. The question isn't a question of: are you numerically the same person who did the murder because we know that you are in this case by supposition; was it you, that guy? There is a question of whether it *comes from* you, whether it's an action that's truly *attributable* to you.

**And the characterization question comes up in trans issues; I know Caitlin Jenner is in the news, but I remember one of the things that surprised me about George W. Bush is a classmate of his who had transitioned from male to female came to a reunion party at the White House and he was very gracious and said, "congratulations on becoming the person you always were," or something like that. So that way of putting it suggests the characterization question, that now your body matches what you always thought it should. This is the real you. But there's no question the person he went to school with is a different person in the reidentification issue from the person who visited the White House.**

Right, so I think the question of reidentification is one question and the question of characterization is another question, and they were treated together. And the reason I think they were treated together, so this is why it is so important to me that Locke bases his relational view of identity on these practical considerations, because I think it's Locke who says if a person is someone—he doesn't put it this way—but a person is someone whom these characterization issues arise in a particular way; that's what it is to be a person. That's what it is for a person to be a forensic term, to be a being about whom we can ask these questions. And he uses that to come up with a metaphysical criterion of identity. So the two became connected. What we care about in the contemporary era, where people like Parfit and [Sydney] Shoemaker and [John] Perry are writing on

## Philosophical Profiles

personal identity, is supposed to be explained by the relation that defines identity. There's a presumption that the definition of personal identity has to be in psychological terms because Locke has shown us that a biological account of identity isn't going to get at this aspect of personhood.

**And that's part of what's so jarring about animalism, that you lose that all of a sudden. And Olson, who is its most vocal proponent, makes great pleasure saying, "I don't care about those issues"; it's like, "you can't not care about those issues—those are the issues!"**

Well he *cares* about them, he just doesn't think they have anything to do with the metaphysics of identity.

**Well, he does actually say, "I don't find that an interesting question." He's a true philosophy nerd: "I only care about parts of animals or true Aristotelian notions".**

So, in the first book what I say is: a lot of where we've gotten stuck in personal identity is that we're looking for something with the form of a reidentification and an answer to the reidentification question. We're looking for criterion of numerical identity over time to tell us that "the person-slice at time T-2 is identical to the person slice at time T-1".

**This is why people don't read philosophy because they come across statements like that!**

Exactly; well, you have to know stuff like that. But whatever it is that's supposed to answer these questions about "should we hold the person responsible?", "should the person at time T-1 be assured that the person at time T-2 is going to be there after the cataclysmic natural disaster or war or whatever?" And so, basically what I say in the first book is the stuff we care about has the form of the characterization question. I want to know that I am still going to have experiences in the future, which is a different question, really, from the question of: "will there be someone in the future identical to me who will have experiences?" Or at least so I argue.

**Yes, you sort of get this untangling in the famous Bernard Williams Makropulos case discussion. Because he says you can't have both in heaven: either it will cease to be me or it will be something unappealing because if it is me I'll be bored and if I'm not bored it isn't me. I lived in Arkansas at one point and there were a lot of religious channels on basic cable and I remember this—it stuck in my head vividly—this preacher was saying, "if you like the quiet, well too bad because in heaven there's going to be ten thousand people shouting 'Hallelujah' for every second of every day." And I thought, "There goes my last incentive to be good because that sure sounds like Hell to me". But you can say, of course, no, no if you get there you'll enjoy that; in which case I don't want to be that person. I don't recognize that person, I don't identify with that person, I don't care if that person is there. Now, what do you think is Parfit's major contribution; you said this is something obviously wrong, people can't believe this, and now the more you've thought about it it's at least real and important and hard to engage with. What would you say is his major contribution? And then, what do you think he gets most wrong?**

## Marya Schechtman

They're the same things; well, they're not really the same thing. So it's what you said before, which is, he's someone who is not only extremely clear-headed and thorough, but absolutely willing to bite the bullet. What he does is take what was, at that time, very much the most popular, dominant theory, the psychological theory of personal identity, and he takes it to its logical conclusion. He says this is where it leads you. The way that works in just a few short steps is, I think: the memory theory was problematic, what are we going to say about what sameness of consciousness is? People who revived the Lockean notion don't talk about the sameness of consciousness, they talk about psychological continuity and they give it all kinds of specificity. And what it amounts to, roughly, is: you take psychological connections—and Parfit also lays this out very nicely, his precision and detail is very good—so there are psychological connections between the memory and the experience remembered and the intention that carries it out, or different moments of a belief, or a value, or a desire that remains the same. Those are psychological connections between the contents of consciousness at two different times, not necessarily the contents of consciousness because they don't have to be conscious, but psychological makeup at two different times. If you get enough of those, and you get an overlapping chain of them, now I'm psychologically connected strongly to myself yesterday, the day before, and so on. That can make me strongly psychologically connected or continuous with myself at age ten, even though I remember very little and have very little in common...so it's really the Ship of Theseus, where you're replacing the planks of your psychology gradually over time. That's what personal identity consists in. So roughly what makes me the same as some past person is that there are these overlapping chains of psychological connection, my psychology changes gradually, and so on. And then there are further consideration people add, like that they have to be caused in a particular way, and so on. I'm going to leave those aside for now. So that's what psychological continuity is, that's the definition of personal identity. Well then it turns out that once that's laid out in that detail, it doesn't look very compelling as a grounds for holding me responsible for what I did in the past or for my caring about persisting in the future, and for just the reasons you said when you gave the Glover example about the Star Trek transporter. I can easily imagine someone who is psychologically connected to me now by having psychological makeup very like mine or connected to mine over time this way, with whom I have no continuity of consciousness in the strong sense that I thought was so important in Locke, so that I don't really expect to experience what happens to her. It isn't a comfort to know that I'll be dissolved but the evil neurosurgeon will mess with my neighbor's brain so she's psychologically continuous with me. And it also doesn't seem very fair to hold her responsible for all those nasty things I did or wrong things I said in my book just because the evil neurosurgeon went in and messed with her brain. And any way you try to fix that, by saying you have to have the same brain or something, runs afoul the original Lockean intuition that sameness of substance can't do the work. That's why I don't think that helps. A lot of work was being done when Parfit's book came out for people to explain why, given this theory of personal identity, I should be concerned with what happens to my future self, because it doesn't seem to flow naturally from the relation. So the presumption was, given this methodological thing that we took from Locke, that if you couldn't explain why you should care about your future self then something was wrong with the view of personal identity. And what Parfit basically did was come in and say, "nope, something's wrong with *your* view that you should *care* about your future self." And so what he said was: "Look, this is the best we can do in the Lockean vein,

“ So roughly what makes me the same as some past person is that there are these overlapping chains of psychological connection, my psychology changes gradually, and so on. So that's what psychological continuity is, that's the definition of personal identity. Well then it turns out that once that's laid out in that detail, it doesn't look very compelling as a grounds for holding me responsible for what I did in the past or for my caring about persisting in the future. It isn't a comfort to know that I'll be dissolved but the evil neurosurgeon will mess with my neighbor's brain so she's psychologically continuous with me. ”

## Philosophical Profiles

roughly, that's how I reconstruct him. We don't directly experience the past, we don't directly experience the future. If there's going to be a psychological account of personal identity that can hope to capture the forensic practices, this is what it looks like, this psychological continuity theory. And guess what? You're right, once it's laid out it's too weak to support practices that we connect with personal identity, of only holding people responsible for what they did, or thinking that people have a special reason to care about their own futures in a way that they don't have a reason to care about the futures of others."

**Well I thought his main problem with the psychological continuity theory of personal identity was that it treats fission as a failure when it's a double success.**

That's one problem but that problem is solvable—I think many people take that to be Parfit's main contribution, but I take it to be a step on the way to what I see as his main contribution. So the fission case, he says, suppose you split in two—he does it with transplant of half-brains, I like it better if you do it like an amoeba, but whatever it is—you split into two objects that are psychologically continuous with you now, each has the relation that we think matters in personal identity; the one that would support responsibility for past actions, concern for the future, satisfy our desire to survive, and so on. So there are two of them but they can't both be identical to me because the logic of identity does not permit two distinct things to be identical to one, it's implausible to say there are not two distinct things—they certainly seem to be symmetric so you can't say one is the same but not the other, or neither is, so the best answer to the question of what happens in fission is that I cease to exist, but I cease to exist in this special way, instead of nobody connected to me in the future, there are two people connected to me in the future. But that certainly is at least as good as ordinary survival. It has everything we want in ordinary survival.

**So he's saying if you're committed to a view of personal identity, if you're trying to save personal identity, the best answer that you can give is that you cease to exist but everything we care about continues, so it's silly to say that, and we should give up on this commitment to personal identity.**

But later on he says something that I think is even stronger, that moves me even more, which is in fission this relation of psychological continuity is still supposed to carry everything you care about. But then he considers what he calls *the extreme claim*, this objection that laid bare the fact that psychological continuity doesn't seem strong enough to support what we care about. That doesn't seem like enough for survival, for responsibility, and so on.

**Now what example do you think best illustrates this, something like the Glover case? Because there is continuity but once it's put that starkly I see that person and say "I don't care about that person, I see that person as a pretender" or something?**

Yes.

**But then I think the usual move is just to say well there is something wrong with the causal connection; clearly transporters destroy what's important. Otherwise wouldn't I have the same worry about me a second from now?**

## Marya Schechtman

Well, and Parfit thinks you should. So here's the thing: you want to say there's something wrong with the causal connections so you need to have the continuity caused by the same brain, let's say. But the original Parfitian insight is: merely having the same chunk of meat isn't enough. That's not going to do it for you. And the reason that that's not going to do it for you is because it's the phenomenological or experiential connection you care about, not the causal basis for it. So what you need to do is guarantee the right kind of experiential connection, and then what you want to say is, well we have it in everyday life, so whatever's causing it here seems to work to do it, but you don't have it in teletransportation. And I think what Parfit does is challenge you to say, well, if there's a difference in the quality of experience, not just the cause because the cause isn't the relevant factor for what we care about; what we care about is the quality of experience. So if there's really a difference in the quality of the experience, tell me what it is, describe it to me, because anything you give me in day-to-day life I can give to you in the replica on Mars. And this is supposed to be a deep experiential difference between what happens when I really continue and when I'm teleported, but for whom is it an experiential difference? It's not different for the replica, there's no experiencer to have a different experience. So what I think he's saying is that we're looking for something that isn't there. The way I think about it is something like this: well, you're saying that it turns out, when you get teleported to Mars it's not you on Mars. But suppose you fall asleep on the space ship to Mars, and then you wake up. I mean, how do you know that's you? How do you know you weren't replaced by a replica? *Blade Runner* gives a good example of this. Rachel, who discovers she was a replicant and didn't know it, and memories she thought she had were not really her memories, and so on.

**I think there's a court case here. If I had any talent as a writer I would be working on this screenplay of where you have various competing descendants of an individual who are arguing for their share of the pie, or something, the property, or who gets to be married to the marriage partner. And they all think they have a claim because I think Rachel, in some sense, has a valid claim to whatever goes along with the memories because it's the memories of the niece of the replicant designer, and I'm assuming that she died. So imagine that she dies and I think that Rachel should be able to make a legal case for property or relationships because of these memories that she has.**

Right, but if you were the niece and you were dying and your uncle said "don't worry I made Rachel," would that comfort you?

**In the same sense of a lot of hippies in the sixties turned into yuppies in the eighties, and if you showed the hippies the yuppies they'd become they'd say, "Oh, God I don't care to live if that's what I become." But that is what they became, wasn't it?**

Well, right but that doesn't mean—not caring to live and not living are not the same thing.

**So that would be getting the characterization and the reidentification distinction.**

So that's what I think Parfit's getting at. To me, I feel very strongly that Parfit...what he says in the end, the phrase of his that sticks with me, and this was the part I thought was wacky and thought people would just reject; he says: we think that being killed

“ The way I think about it is something like this: well, you're saying that it turns out, when you get teleported to Mars it's not you on Mars. But suppose you fall asleep on the space ship to Mars, and then you wake up. I mean, how do you know that's you? How do you know you weren't replaced by a replica? *Blade Runner* gives a good example of this. Rachel, who discovers she was a replicant and didn't know it, and memories she thought she had were not really her memories. ”

## Philosophical Profiles

and having a replica is worse than ordinary survival, but it isn't. It's as good as ordinary survival. Well he says it's the same, there's no big difference between dying and having a replica and ordinary survival. But he's saying that's not because having a replica is as good as ordinary survival, it's because ordinary survival turns out to be as bad as having a replica. And it's actually this that gets to the glass tunnel thing. This is when he gets all Buddhist and he says, as far as I understand Buddhism, which is not at all. This is where he goes to the glass tunnel and what he says is, roughly, our practices concerning persons have been based on the assumption that there's a deep unity in the life of a single person. And as it turns out, it's a very loose unity in the life of a person, or at least looser than we thought. There's no deep metaphysical unity in a life, there's really just Hume, these associations and so on. And so once we know that everything changes. This was the part I just couldn't accept. "I used to be scared of dying, but now I'm not scared about dying because all that means is that there won't be someone in the future who won't have certain psychological connections with me. And I used to be worried about future pain, but now I don't care, it just means..." in the same way. And given the big payoff is support of consequentialism against the objections from distributive justice and autonomy and so on. This idea that there is not a deep unity of compensation or justice or so on that goes over the course of my entire life. My relations to other people are not so different from my relations to my past and future self, so, for instance, smoking becomes immoral instead of imprudent because I'm visiting potential disease on some future person to whom I'm only loosely related, and so on. So I don't accept any of that. But it seems to me he laid down a really serious challenge, he really did show that the way people were going at it, trying to show somehow that this relation of psychological continuity could do the work was not working, it wasn't going to pan out, and there was no obvious other direction to go.

**That's a good segue to your view of narrativity, your narrative self-construction view. Perhaps you could sketch the view in its initial form as presented in *The Constitution of Selves*.**

The idea was to go back to Locke because as I said earlier, I didn't think Locke was talking about memory, and because I didn't think Locke was talking about memory I thought that the way that the psychological continuity theory was built by starting with memory theory and adding stuff to it and tweaking it to it a bit to turn it into something bigger wasn't going to get at what seemed so right in Locke. So I thought what seemed right in Locke was this idea of appropriation, that I make these past and future experiences mine and I do it by taking them to be mine, and when I take them to be mine they play a role in my life that they otherwise would not. What seemed to me helpful in thinking about this was the notion of narrative, and one of the reasons I chose the notion of narrative is that what seemed to me particularly wrong about the way psychological continuity theorists were going about things was that they were starting with a kind of ontology of person time-slices... Not everybody gave it a lot of ontological heft, but still the vocabulary was: you start with a person time-slice at one time, you look at a person time-slice at another time, and you ask yourself: what relation do they have to have to one another to be part of the same person? And so you're starting with very individual subjects, these very discrete subjects, and you're trying to find out the glue that will put them together. And Parfit effectively says that there is no glue strong enough to get you what you want. So my idea was that you have to take a more holistic approach.

“So that's what I think Parfit's getting at. he says: we think that being killed and having a replica is worse than ordinary survival, but it isn't. It's as good as ordinary survival. Well he says it's the same, there's no big difference between dying and having a replica and ordinary survival. But he's saying that's not because having a replica is as good as ordinary survival, it's because ordinary survival turns out to be as bad as having a replica. This was the part I just couldn't accept. "I used to be scared of dying, but now I'm not scared about dying because all that means is that there won't be someone in the future who won't have certain psychological connections with me.”

**Replace glue with knitting.**

Right, replace glue with knitting, or with tapestry or with stew at one point, or soup. Something where there's a sense that the whole is prior to the part in some important way. And narrative seems to me a very good example of this because the unity of a narrative is not this kind of unity of you take a bunch of events and then you say okay, I'm going to turn them into a narrative by gluing them together...what you've got is a story in which each event needs to be understood in the context of the whole to be the event it is. This idea of what I'm doing now, what I'm feeling now, what I'm saying now, has to be understood in a larger context to be understood at all.

**One point in favor of this view is that we actually forget the vast majority that happen to us, and this would seem to be a huge tragedy on a par with losing our selves if you go with the straightforward consciousness view. But what you can say is, "those weren't part of the narrative, that's why they're not important."**

I would say they are part of the narrative, but they don't still have to be there to be part of the narrative.

**They were removed by the editor?**

I don't even mean that—I wouldn't even say that, exactly.

**So what you mean is, in other words, I don't need to remember them for them still to be there?**

To be mine, yes; to be part of my narrative.

**So in other words, if somebody shows me that I did something wrong and I can't remember it, I can't disavow it just because I don't remember it.**

Right, if they show it to you and there's proof it would be very strange for you to say, "well, I don't remember it." So there's a lot of things to say about narratives used in this context. My claim is, first of all, about personhood—before we get to personal identity—what is it to be a person? And there I take very seriously Locke's idea that being a person is considering yourself as the same person over time. So I think the part of what it is, and I've said a lot about this earlier, part of what it is to be a person is to understand yourself as a persisting being that has a past, will have a future, whose current state is in many ways dependent on what happened in the past, whose future is in many ways dependent on what will happen now. Before knowing any details, just that you have that sense of yourself as a persisting being. And this is something that we develop, we humans, and there's some psychological evidence that we develop it as we learn to narrate our days. For toddlers and preschoolers, parents are sitting down with them and saying "what did we do today, where did we go today? Who did we see today? Where did we go? How did that make you feel? Then what did we do, and why did we do that?" And so you learn to think in those terms and as you learn to think in those terms it's not like you are explicitly narrating your life all the time, you are neither walking around saying to yourself, "and then I sat down at this computer to do this Skype interview, little knowing it would be the big break that would get me that Hollywood gig!" So you're not narrating your life, you're not remembering everything; the idea is that it's a form of

“What seemed right in Locke was this idea of appropriation, that I make these past and future experiences mine and I do it by taking them to be mine, and when I take them to be mine they play a role in my life that they otherwise would not. What seemed to me helpful in thinking about this was the notion of narrative, and one of the reasons I chose the notion of narrative is that what seemed to me particularly wrong about the way psychological continuity theorists were going about things was that they were starting with a kind of ontology of person time-slices... the unity of a narrative is not this kind of unity of you take a bunch of events and then you say okay, I'm going to turn them into a narrative by gluing them together... what you've got is a story in which each event needs to be understood in the context of the whole to be the event it is.”

## Philosophical Profiles

psychological organization whereby we automatically experience what happens to us in the context of an ongoing life about which we have a lot of information, some of which we're thinking about explicitly some of which is just there in the background.

**Now I think that one issue that somebody would press you on about this is that it seems circular because what you're saying is that I am the person who creates me, but how can I do that? It's pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.**

So a couple of things to say about that, one of them is my favorite rejoinder to this thing about self-constitution, comes from Chris Korsgaard, something like, you know you look at a giraffe and metabolizing, like a baby giraffe eating and metabolizing, saying "look at that giraffe creating itself! How is that possible?" Organisms are self-constituting beings; nobody seems to have any problem with that.

**Well you can still give a reductive account of that. You can say: there are parts of it that have to be in existence...there comes a point at which you are not self-creating, obviously it was the giraffe's parents and the biological processes that created it and I think the difference is that this is supposed to be conscious in some way and you want to say consciousness exists first of all and then this consciousness creates persons...it seems you still want to make a difference between the thing that has to exist for this whole process to be possible and then the process itself.**

Does this make it sound more like an organism if we go back to the thing I said about narrative as a development or achievement? The idea is—at least in the first book, and much of what I say now will lead to why I ended up having to do the second one—on this view at least you're not yet a person when you're born. In the preschool years certain cognitive capacities start to come online, still got a human there, and that human learns self-narration and lots changes when you do that. So the idea is there's this scaffolded period in which one learns to view the world in this way and think about the world in this way. And when this matures it leads to (and I still believe this even though it's a very hard case to make) a qualitatively new kind of consciousness. So once you learn to do this, events in your past and future impact you in the present in ways that they don't if you don't learn to do this. And that's what makes you a person because at least at this point I'm still operating with the Lockean notion of person, where what makes you a person is the ability to engage in these kinds of high-level, self-reflective forensic activities. So you have to be capable of self-consciousness, and you have to be capable of moral agency, and you have to be capable of prudential reasoning, and all of this I say becomes possible only when you learn to narrate and because only in that way can the past and future be incorporated in your present in a very strong way that we were looking for and that Parfit says is impossible.

**When you present it like that it's primarily from a first-person point of view because you want to say it's a different quality of consciousness, it impacts you in the present, but imagine I create a being like in Blade Runner and she can do all that too, and she has this whole life constructed in her and she exists for, say, five minutes. Is she a person because of that or do you have to add the qualification that there really has to be this being that did this, that the memories have to be correct, that they are, again, we get the causal issues—they have to be created in the right way, so it's not just**

“ In the preschool years certain cognitive capacities start to come online, still got a human there, and that human learns self-narration and lots changes when you do that. It leads to (and I still believe this even though it's a very hard case to make) a qualitatively new kind of consciousness. So once you learn to do this, events in your past and future impact you in the present in ways that they don't if you don't learn to do this. And that's what makes you a person. ”



**a first person point of view, from the point of view of someone outside it has to be “oh you’re right about that because of these events that actually happened in time”?**

So it’s something intermediate; you have to care about being right about it. And what I mean by that is the following. This notion of personhood is more social than Locke’s in the sense that it’s hoping both to get this question about “I care about continuing,” which I think is in your own head, but also this forensic part about it, about what’s special about persons on this view are: we’re capable of certain kinds of relationships, moral agency, *et cetera*. So in order to do that you and those around you have to be on the same page about a lot of things. Otherwise it’s not going to work. So I put two constraints on a narrative that’s going to work to constitute a person, and I’ll come back to the Rachel example, it’s a hard one for me, but I’ll do the best I can with it. One constraint is what I call The Articulation Constraint, which is just that although your narrative is largely implicit you should be able to answer basic questions if put to you. It’s running in the background, but it’s not deeply sub-personal or something.

**This is like your response to Galen Strawson where you wrote that piece where you amended it and looked at the different possible ways you could be a narrator. It could be totally implicit so you don’t know about it, it could be so you don’t think about it but if pressed you can say, “Oh yes I did that because of this,” or it could be the beautifully written life, where everybody is a Jane Austen character, which you don’t require.**

No I do not. And really what I have in mind is things like, “Hey do you have any kids?” You should know the answer to that... “Do you have a job?” So the idea is, really, you should be able to answer questions like what brings you here, do you live nearby...and you can’t always answer them. But if you can’t it should be worrisome for you. If they’re those kinds of questions. Now if someone says, “why did you get so angry at him?” The view does not require that you actually have a ready answer to that.

**Good because I think the vast majority of people would fail.**

So that’s the Articulation Constraint. Then the Reality Constraint says that your narrative has to comport with the fundamental, basic, everyday sense of reality that’s uncontroversial, or at least recognize a burden to do so. So what does that mean? It means if I tell you, “No I don’t have to worry about how much time this is taking because I’m also in Paris shopping for my baguette.” You have a right to say: well how exactly are you doing that, and what does that mean? Or if I tell you: “By the way, I’m Napoleon... you can say, “Well, how does that work? How tall are you? Are you married?” Or if I say, “I’m the president of the United States” or whatever, I break into David Letterman’s house and tell him we’re married...for all of those things, there are ways in which I cannot construct a socially coherent narrative that includes those things. I might have a really good story to tell, and if it’s a good enough story, then we might wonder what’s going on, and all ask questions.

**Would it be good enough to convince David Letterman?**

I’ll try! What I want to be clear on is what the view does not require is that I have to agree with everyone, say, on whether I’m really smart or generous or beautiful, or something. These are things that we all know people disagree on and take different

““ This notion of personhood is more social than Locke’s. I put two constraints on a narrative that’s going to work to constitute a person, and I’ll come back to the Rachel example, it’s a hard one for me, but I’ll do the best I can with it. One constraint is what I call The Articulation Constraint, which is just that although your narrative is largely implicit you should be able to answer basic questions if put to you. Then the Reality Constraint says that your narrative has to comport with the fundamental, basic, everyday sense of reality that’s uncontroversial, or at least recognize a burden to do so. So what does that mean? It means if I tell you, “By the way, I’m Napoleon... you can say, “Well, how does that work? How tall are you? Are you married?” ””

## Philosophical Profiles

perspectives on, and there are ways we can argue about it. If I say that I'm incredibly generous, you can challenge me and say, well much did you give to charity last year, or when someone asked you if they could borrow your book and you said no, or whatever. And I might have rationalizations, but we know people rationalize. The view does hold that I need to be responsive to these kinds of challenges and I need to recognize that I should have a story to tell and when there is no story to tell I should recognize that as well. So that's the idea and the idea is that that's required for my self conception to do this sort of work it's supposed to do of underwriting these social practices.

**I tried this analogy on you and you didn't like this one where the self is the spider and the person is the web and something like the self, which is just this focus of consciousness, is responsible for spinning this narrative, that is the person. And it sounds like you didn't want to put a wedge between the self and the person.**

I think the spider needs a lot of help to spin that web. Maybe what I was talking about is in the real world, generating a narrative...so maybe we were talking about whether someone could be completely removed from any social setting.

**And it's not really the spider that has total control over the web. It sounds like with your social constraints on what narrative is allowed you don't get to spin any web you want where you're married to David Letterman or you're the president of the United States.**

The idea is that the part of the narrative of self-conception really is being sensitive to explanatory burdens that others might put on you, internalizing those. But this is a conception of narrative, again, that is supposed to do the work that a lot of philosophers are trying to do about really explaining what I'm responsible for. This is supposed to allow for the fact that if my narrative is too out of whack, maybe don't hold me responsible for what's part of my narrative, or we don't really see it as attributable to me. I now think I was trying to do too much work with a single view, so partly I get into trouble there.

**In your new book (*Staying Alive: Personal Identity, Practical Concerns, and the Unity of a Life*), one of the things you expand more into is the other area of where persons get talked about a lot in philosophy, which is in the ethical sphere, usually in discussions about animal rights and abortion. That is, what counts as the kind of thing that might have rights or to which we owe duties, or that would be wrong to kill, and so on. And you want to bring those two kinds of discussion about persons together because this is your Person-Life view. And you say some things that are fairly controversial in that section. So for example you defend a view where, say, somebody like very small infants or very impaired individuals, possibly individuals in a persistent vegetative state could count as persons, whereas E.T. maybe doesn't.**

Oh no, E.T. does.

**OK you imagine a super-intelligent dog, then, where you wanted to say it's possible that he doesn't.**

## Marya Schechtman

The super intelligent dog is a person, Mr. Peabody. If you're super intelligent you get to be ...I mean of a certain kind what we call 'super-intelligent' anyway.

**We better be nice to him if he can make time machines.**

Exactly.

**Well, perhaps it would help me if you lay out the Person-Life View.**

Right: there what I'm struggling to do in the parts you're talking about is to say that I have to make a point that all humans who are born in a culture are automatically persons...so there it begins to sound like what makes you a person is just your biological endowment, but I want to say that really I maintain a distinction between a person and human animal and that's where Mr. Peabody comes in, and I'm trying to show how I can have it both ways, and that's why you were confused because it's confusing.

**The better example is you wanted to say that certainly someone who was a severely impaired infant, say, is definitely a person but not our pets. Not Mr. Peabody but a regular dumb dog.**

Right, not our pets, exactly. Maybe I should start at the beginning. I think of it as there being two moments (one corresponding to each book) at which I realized that something very different needed to be said. The first one was Parfit saying this psychological view isn't going to work, and that there doesn't seem to be a kind of unity of consciousness of the sort that would do what we were hoping for it to do and I was trying to see if I could come up with that. And the second moment was reading Eric Olson, you know there are many animalists and many proponents of animalism, and it happened that I read Eric Olson and he brings it up very clearly in a way that was a challenge. So when I first read Olson's book (*The Human Animal*) I thought that in many ways he was saying the same thing as I was saying in *The Constitution of Selves*, only he's coming from it in the metaphysical perspective. That is, I made that distinction between the reidentification question and the characterization question and at that point I said if you want to answer the reidentification question it's probably going to be in terms of something to do with biology and identifying the same human body but the characterization question is the one we're really after and I'm going to answer that with narrative. And Olson, too, (in a very different way and a very helpful way) comes out saying the real problem in the discussion is that people have distinct practical concerns and metaphysical concerns, and why in the world should a metaphysical account of personal identity have anything to do with our human practices or what we care about at all? It's just a fact about the world and that will be different from those things we care about, and if you are a real metaphysician that's the question you're really interested in. but then he raises some really, I think, compelling challenges to any psychological account of personal identity. So you go back to when I was talking about the narrative view: you challenged me and said: how can you constitute yourself, doesn't the thing have to be in place, there was a time before it was there. And I said you've got this infant and the infant has a brain and the infant has parents and the parents talk to the infant and the brain changes and then you get a person out of that. And then what I read Olson as doing, among many other things, is saying, "So what's the ontological status of that person? Is that a thing? Because what you're telling me now is that there's this human being, human

“ I think of it as there being two moments (one corresponding to each book) at which I realized that something very different needed to be said. The first one was Parfit saying this psychological view isn't going to work. And the second moment was reading Eric Olson. ”

## Philosophical Profiles

animal, an infant, who gains some kind of capacity, cognitive capacities, and then a new thing comes into existence. I mean that makes no sense, what happened to the old thing? Where's the human? What happened to the old thing? Is it still there? If it's not there you're telling me something went out of existence and something completely materially coincident with it suddenly popped into existence when this thing learned how to narrate, that's pretty weird. And if it loses its ability to narrate, does it pop out of existence? That's very strange." Or suppose you want to say, no, there's a second thing, the person, so you've got the human and this second thing comes into existence, the person. So he says, "What's the connection between the two? There are two coincident beings and one is talking, which one is thinking?" So he's got all these arguments that are pretty metaphysically awkward to say that a person is an entity, an object, a substance, and that it's not identical to a human animal.

**See I think Trinitarians could handle this issue fairly straightforwardly. If you're committed Christian who believes God in three persons, you shouldn't be this worried by these metaphysical issues.**

Well you might be worried though if *we're* like that. Because God's pretty special. But also you might be willing to say it was a "mystery" if you're a Trinitarian in a way that Olson is not willing to say.

**It's not mysterious at all.**

But it's true, there are many who would oppose animalism in something like that way, to say it's not so strange, there are ways in which these two coincident beings can both be present.

**I'm sure this has been discussed and I haven't really followed up on it, but it seems like someone like David Lewis has something of a response because he can say there is one thing existing, that thing is just part of two different things. For example, this is one thing right now but from a four-dimensional point of view, you can see, it's like a section that's part of two freeways. Is it the 23? Yes. Is it the 75? Yes. But is it just one section of road? Yes.**

Yes, except that it doesn't split. One is a proper subset of the other.

**Unless we imagine the person continuing in heaven, or something like that.**

True enough. So he does just reject four-dimensionalism. So Olson makes a lot of metaphysical assumptions. He just rejects four-dimensionalism.

**Well in his more recent one, I know he gives some arguments, but it's the usual discussion that you get in that metaphysical realm.**

And it's brief. He says you have to start somewhere, he reasonably says, you can't fight all these battles. So he accepts a very strong form of essentialism; there are bare particulars in the world and each one belongs to one and only one kind essentially. It has one and only one substance-concept.

**And he seems drawn to Peter van Inwagen's view where there are basic components and then lives, organisms. But isn't an organism just as questionable a concept, if not more so, than anything we're dealing with here?**

I certainly think so.

**Are my cells separate organisms, and yet they're part of me? And all that business.**

What about the bacteria in your gut?

**How much of this is me? And if you replace it with plastic, according to Olson, it ceases to be me; but why does it cease it to be me? Because it's not alive, but then you get into the issue of what is alive and that hasn't been settled.**

He makes many assumptions. There are many places to get off the bus with him.

**But I shouldn't be challenging Olson when I'm not talking to Olson.**

Yeah, you should be talking to him. But really the part that got to me that seemed like a righteous criticism...there are two things that led me to the second book. One is the Olson thing and I have another story too. So one is just seemed to me right that however you think of entities or substances or whatever there's something funny about saying that a new thing pops into existence when we learn to be self-narrators. That's sort of questionable. And then the other thing that had been the back of my mind for a really long time is this panel I had been on quite a while ago that was arranged at the Berman Institute at Johns Hopkins, which was really helpful (though it didn't seem so at the time) that had the philosophers of personal identity describe their views of personal identify and how they applied to fictional clinical cases in neurology, and then there were clinical neurologists there as well. And there was a lot of crosstalk at that point. But one of the neurologists said, "Hey look: according to all of you guys, because we all had these good psychological chunks of identity with Lockean conceptions of personhood, according to you guys none of my patients is a person". And we said, "Well yes, it's true that is what we think..."

**"Guilty!"**

"...but don't take it as "Put them on an ice flow to die"! Oh no, no, no it has nothing to do with them dying, and it's an honorific and it's a technical term in philosophy and they can be very nice individuals, they're just not persons..." and the more I said it, the more I thought, you know, this is just not true. These are people. Of course you can have a technical term, and of course the Lockean notion of personhood describes something that is important to us and that is useful to think about and so on, and of course you can use your terms technically in whatever way you want, but it seemed to me that something substantial was being missed in limiting personhood to this very narrow set of attributes and this very narrow range of individuals. Hilary Putnam once told me when I was writing my thesis, he said, so you mean an infant isn't a person? And I said no, and he said, "You'll change your mind when you have kids." And I didn't really. I was too tired. That semi-ethical consideration, I don't know how to characterize it, humanistic consideration, together with Olson's metaphysical challenge made me think there is something wrong with the narrative account of personhood as really the story

“ The other thing that had been the back of my mind for a really long time is this panel I had been on quite a while ago that was arranged at the Berman Institute at Johns Hopkins, which was really helpful (though it didn't seem so at the time) that had the philosophers of personal identity describe their views of personal identify and how they applied to fictional clinical cases in neurology, and then there were clinical neurologists there as well. One of the neurologists said, "Hey look: according to all of you guys, because we all had these good psychological chunks of identity with Lockean conceptions of personhood, according to you guys none of my patients is a person". ”

## Philosophical Profiles

of what it is to be a person. People would raise questions with very garden-variety forms of mental illness, the narrative conception starts falling apart and people start falling out of personhood who shouldn't fall out of personhood in my mind.

**We get into this in philosophy an awful lot, and you inveigh against this in your book. We love necessary and sufficient conditions. It's like our party trick; it's what we're good at. And we're good at pointing out when they're not met...and certainly we demand necessary and sufficient conditions in law. There needs to be a certain set of necessary conditions for what is pornography if you're going to regulate it. It certainly gets challenged and we try to settle what those are if it comes up for debate. But it looks more and more something like a person what we have in mind is an archetype and we want it to spread out and cover things close enough—maybe this is what Wittgenstein means by his notion of “games”—but we wanted to spread out and cover the ones that are close enough but we don't want it to cover too much so the boundaries get vague, but when you talk about the “person life” in your new book, it looks like at first that it's dangerously conventionalist and, of course, you acknowledge this and say “No, my view isn't conventionalist because this, this, and this”, because what we worry about is that if we give too much power to the culture there are bad cultures and, as you say, we can have a culture that doesn't acknowledge certain humans as full persons, and so on. So you want to block that but at the same time someone who is a campaigner for the rights of non-humans would have problems with your trying to draw a line between human beings as persons and comparably talented non-humans, like our pets, as not persons. So what's your quick response to them?**

The quick response to them is although I try to connect the notion of being a person to practical considerations in a quite direct way; it's less direct than some others. Being a person does mean you're the kind of being about whom certain kinds of questions are raised and certain kinds of expectations exist. But seeing someone as a person does not mean respecting them or treating them well or anything like that. It might mean you should, I don't enter into those questions, I don't really do any of that kind of prescriptive ethics. In response to the early problems I wanted to include infants, I wanted to include people with dementia...the way I did that was to say look at the person roughly over the course of a whole life. To be a person is to be an individual who has the expectation of and therefore lives a certain kind of life and life is roughly the paradigm of a human in a culture. And what that means is from infancy you're brought into the practices of a person life, the kind of life a person lives, and scaffolded up to be a mature person, who is a Lockean person in the ordinary course of events and very frequently loses the capacities that make you a Lockean person. So a lot depends on the culture recognizing you, your social-cultural infrastructure recognizing as a person. That's how we get into the problems he describes. So one objection is: what about cultures that see whole groups of humans as non-persons? And the example I give there, I go back to this point to see someone as a person is to see them as the kind of being that lives this kind of life that roughly involves being someone who will perpetuate, contribute to, and live within the cultural infrastructure. Being a person doesn't mean treating someone nicely, and so the example I use is borrowed from my adviser Stanley Cavell is: what about people who say, “well in the antebellum South, slave holders didn't see their slaves as persons?” and I say, let's look at the slave codes that prevents from possession anti-slavery literatures,

“ In response to the early problems I wanted to include infants, I wanted to include people with dementia...the way I did that was to say look at the person roughly over the course of a whole life. To be a person is to be an individual who has the expectation of and therefore lives a certain kind of life and life is roughly the paradigm of a human in a culture. And what that means is from infancy you're brought into the practices of a person life, the kind of life a person lives, and scaffolded up to be a mature person, who is a Lockean person in the ordinary course of events and very frequently loses the capacities that make you a Lockean person. So a lot depends on the culture recognizing you. ”

## Marya Schechtman

testifying in court, entering into contracts...You don't see stuff like that about the horses or the cows.

**It's the master-slave problem; you want to dominate these persons but at the same time they have to be capable of acknowledging you, and if they're capable of acknowledging you, then...**

And it's not just contingent that these laws are there. Look, the slaveholders are seeing the slaves as persons because they can see they could read, they could get married, they could own firearms and shoot them, they could rebel against them. And it's not just coincidental or accidental that they did it because if they didn't they would have had a hard time keeping the institution of slavery going because clearly these were people who were capable of all of those things and needed to be forcibly kept from doing them. The answer about "What if you don't treat humans who have ordinary capacities of a human being as persons, does that make them non-persons," what I want to say is it's really not possible to see humans as non-persons. It's hard to see how that could work in a culture in the sense of non-person that I'm talking about.

**Certainly there have been cultures where people who were born deformed were put out to die, and, of course, slaves' right to life wasn't respected. And you can imagine that there was this common birth defect where people were born severely intellectually disabled and they looked different enough from us that we could dissociate from them, we could tell some story like they're "changelings". These people are changelings who have been cursed by the fairies or whatever. And we get to eat them. You can imagine a culture doing that.**

Yes and I think that's right. So that is for me the hardest case, the case of ordinary, typical humans with typical human cognitive capacities and developmental trajectories being treated badly is not for me a case of treating them as non-persons, and you don't have to respect their right to life to treat them as non-persons, too. Moving from slaves to other atrocities, if you make the enemy defile their sacred texts before you slit their throats, you're treating them as a person because defiling their sacred texts is something peculiar to persons. So that's that one. And then the other question is, say within our culture, let's just take our culture for a minute, how about the human child born with severe cognitive disabilities so that that child is less cognitively able than the family pet who also, by the way, we love and take to Doggie Daycare and pet therapy and dress in clothes and sports jerseys and things...why aren't we making the pet a person, and how could we make the cognitively disabled infant who can't even do any of these things a person, just by taking her to the doctor and dressing her in sports jerseys and things. And my answer to that is: first of all, there's some sleight of hand even in directly comparing the cognitive capacities between the two, they just have two different kinds of cognitive capacities. The pet can be left alone, the pet could probably survive on its own, the cognitively disabled infant couldn't. Of the many things I want to say, one thing is that the role of embodiment is pretty important. It's of course not essential because things that are embodied differently, if they have the right cognitive capacities, could also be persons. But the fact that this individual is flesh of our flesh and eats the same thing we do and is in the same temper...all of those things, I quote Shylock...these play a role. Part of what I'm saying is you become a person by being recognized by a person by the social-cultural infrastructure.

“ Of the many things I want to say, one thing is that the role of embodiment is pretty important. It's of course not essential because things that are embodied differently, if they have the right cognitive capacities, could also be persons. But the fact that this individual is flesh of our flesh and eats the same thing we do and is in the same temper... all of those things, I quote Shylock... these play a role. Part of what I'm saying is you become a person by being recognized by a person by the social-cultural infrastructure. ”

**But on the other hand, that culture has a duty to recognize the right things and it can't not recognize you if you meet a certain standard?**

I don't even say it's a duty, it's just how culture works.

**An intellectual duty?**

Right, right. Let's say an intellectual duty, maybe it's a moral duty too, I just don't pronounce on that. Partly here I go Wittgensteinian a little bit, at least how I understand Wittgenstein... Two things, I would say. One, in putting the social-cultural infrastructure into place, we cannot recognize persons on a case-by-case basis. It's just not feasible. There are certain kinds of individuals, and here I use some of the work of Hilde Lindemann, who get brought into personhood. So, in some ways you are bringing the unborn child into personhood if you're planning to have it and raise it...before it's even born and before you know anything about its cognitive capacities and things like that, you're preparing the way for it. And so what I say is the way in which we recognize a child with severe cognitive deficits—Hilde Lindemann gives the example of her own sister who was born hydrocephalic in an age when they couldn't do much about it, lived just eighteen months and never gained any milestones—the difference, the way in which we treat that individual as a person and not the family pet can be seen in the different reactions we have to that fact. The example I give is if you tell human parents that their human child is never going to be able to speak or feed herself or tie her shoes, this is considered a tragedy.

**Whereas it wouldn't be for the pet.**

Whereas it wouldn't be for the pet. If you say, look, your poodle puppy is never going to be able to learn to speak English or hold a job or eat with a knife and fork, you're going to say, "Okay..." If you organized a walk to look for the cause and cure for the first that would be noble, if you organized a walk for why your poodle puppy is never going to be able to speak or hold a job or do elementary mathematics, you've made a mistake. But I haven't talked about your hard case yet.

**You do want to be careful that you don't by fiat settle issues like abortion and removing people from life support machines just by saying that they're of the type that you don't do that to.**

I just say they're of the type that are persons, now what I do think is the case is that we have kinds of debates about whether it's okay to terminate human pregnancies or remove humans from life support that we don't have about other cases.

**So sometimes it's okay to kill persons?**

I do not say anything about that but the view is silent on it. I think I would say probably yes. But there's a lot of qualification behind that and part of the Wittgensteinian bit of my view is to say yes we love binary decisions in philosophy, you're either a person or a non-person, but although it's a terrible term, there are degenerate cases of personhood. We recognize that a fetal person is relevantly different in many ways from a mature person and some people think that difference is relevant in the sense that it's enough to allow terminating pregnancy. Other people don't. That's a really hard debate. But I do



## Marya Schechtman

not think that acknowledging personhood resolves that debate. I did have a moment of terror that it did, where I wrote a chapter and said, oh no I just said abortion is immoral or something. But it doesn't. For it to have practical consequences without going that far is tricky.

**The other thing you said that was worth discussing is one of the ways you defended yourself against conventionalism is you said, "look this isn't as if I'm saying a cabal of intellectual leaders gets together and hammers out policy; it's much more organic than that, it emerges." But that has a downside too, because if we had a good cabal of us guys—well, not us guys, but maybe the ideal set of Rawlsian parties in the original position or something—then shouldn't we have more confidence in the standards of that society than ones that have just emerged at random and produced strange quirks?**

But we beings who do philosophy and can be Rawlsians *emerged*.

**But in very specific circumstances and not in all cultures necessarily.**

That is correct. So is the thought experiment about whether we should trust them more about which things are persons?

**You seem to have a rather sanguine view of human cultures, that we sort of muddle through and that the attitudes that we have, like to babies—we love babies!—and things like that are going to be the right ones and it seems like you hint at a kind of evolutionary view that cultures that didn't have the right kind of view that counted as persons have just vanished from the earth because they just killed each other or something.**

The right kind of view, I don't know what the right kind of view is. I think there's plenty of room for thinking about how we ought to treat other people, and whether we're doing it right, and also for how we ought to treat things that aren't other people but are awfully nice like...spiders, giraffes...

**Cows.**

...and how we ought to treat the environment, and a lot of other things. My response, I guess, to what you said, is something like this: it's less that I think these cultures have the right attitude toward what's a person, as that that's just what a person *is*. Let me try to say what I mean. The Lockean view of person distinguishes persons from humans by asking what's special about us: humans are animals like other animals, but then there's something special and distinctive about us, and special doesn't have to be good, it's just special; it's distinctive. What is distinctive? And for Locke that's our capacity for reflective self-consciousness as it is for many other people; our capacity for moral agency, rationality, prudential concern, and so on. And what I want to say is all those things are distinctive of us but there's something more basic that's distinctive of us; something that depends on the fact that we mature to have those capacities, but on which those capacities themselves also depend. And that is: we live in cultures. And of course the question of what constitutes a culture is not an easily settled one, but roughly a culture has social infrastructure, maybe religious beliefs, educational systems by which

“ There are degenerate cases of personhood. We recognize that a fetal person is relevantly different in many ways from a mature person and some people think that difference is relevant in the sense that it's enough to allow terminating pregnancy. Other people don't. That's a really hard debate. But I do not think that acknowledging personhood resolves that debate. ”

## Philosophical Profiles

knowledge is transmitted from generation to generation, codified codes of conduct, and so on, for good or ill. I'm not saying they're great, but that's what a culture is. I want to say once we do that, once we live in a culture, once we acculturate, all kinds of ways of life become possible for us that were not previously, that were not possible without cultural and social infrastructure. And for beings like humans at least, there seems to be good evidence that in fact with the development of culture all kinds of physiological changes happen just because diet changes, and activity level changes, and ways of life change. So over time, all kinds of basic biological features change, and moreover there seems to be evidence that what happens to you when you live in a culture is that your brain architecture changes in your youth in a way that if you're a feral child never happens. So that for me is my kind of way to be a person, is to live within that kind of structure and one of the features of the structure is that it tends to develop beings who have the Lockean capacities because without that you couldn't have culture because that's what does all the codifying and infrastructure building. So then the idea would be, sure, that codifying could be morally pernicious or that codifying might be morally good, so in terms of being good or evil, like about how you should treat other people, that's an open question. But the question of who you should treat as a person, I think, has very strong biological constraints on it for us, within the social-cultural infrastructure that to have a culture in which you thought, say, that *all* human babies were changelings and should be killed, that culture *would* die out pretty quickly. Now the question whether you could think the half who had this very common deformity were non-persons, that's a harder question for me and I think that what I would have to do on that is just bite the bullet and say that, yes, if there really were such a culture, and really these things were thrown off to die with no religious ceremony or burial or nobody crying about it except for the "My bad luck to have a changeling," then those humans would not be persons. Now is the society right to see them as non-persons? And can we ask that question? That's harder for me; I don't know what to say about that honestly. But it's a very extreme case, what I'm saying is you can't have a society in which you have a society which thinks all girls are non-persons and kill them all, not without a lot of chemicals to produce eggs or something.

**You could have a culture where it was pre-ordained that you only have one child, I'm not thinking of China because that's an official policy; where it was the view that everything after the first child were demon beings that grew up to destroy the first child so you have to kill them.**

It's not clear to me that that's really imaginable. That's no argument to say it's not clear to me that that's imaginable and so there I have to do one of two things: either I have to rely on things before, and to say part of what I'm saying is that person is a sort of cluster concept and there isn't a set of necessary and sufficient conditions and so that all the dangers attendant on that or I just have to say for any philosophical position you're going to come up with a hard case; I don't really think it's imaginable but I can't say it isn't and it's not crazy, it's not like the Parfitian splitting your brain in two and working on two math problems.

**You're not in a field that you can object to crazy examples.**

I think at that point I just have to say that would be a hard case for me and I can't answer all hard cases but I hope that at least the change of direction is fruitful.

“ There's something more basic that's distinctive of us; something that depends on the fact that we mature to have those capacities, but on which those capacities themselves also depend. And that is: we live in cultures. There seems to be evidence that what happens to you when you live in a culture is that your brain architecture changes in your youth in a way that if you're a feral child never happens. So that for me is my kind of way to be a person, is to live within that kind of structure and one of the features of the structure is that it tends to develop beings who have the Lockean capacities because without that you couldn't have culture because that's what does all the codifying and infrastructure building. ”

Right. One more thing that I just have been thinking of and I wondered if you had something to say about: there are cases where, and this has more to do with the issue of personal identity than personhood, there are cases where people with Alzheimer's or another form of dementia, their personality can change radically and there are a couple of cases...the movie *Away From Her* has one example where she falls in love with someone else and it's very hurtful for her husband, but should you let her because she's a different person? Also actual cases, nonfictional cases: one was where a woman had been a lifelong heterosexual and then she develops this gay relationship in the nursing home and the family is very disapproving because they do not condone homosexuality at all, and the nursing staff is being told they have to keep these people apart who clearly love each other, but they in a non-heterosexual way. Another case was a lifelong very strict vegetarian who developed a taste for...  
...for meatballs!

**What would you say about that? Would you say it's just a different person? Would you say the narrative has just changed radically, or is there something you think your view has to say about something like that?**

The *Constitution of Selves* narrative view: it depends on how much self-narrating capacity remains but would likely say that this is a different person, but I'm not sure about that. It would depend a lot on the details of the case, but would very easily say it's a different person. The current view, the expanded notion of personhood in *Staying Alive*? One way of putting it, my sound bite I've got because I learned this in seventh grade health class, is a bio-psycho-social view of a person. The way in which *Staying Alive* is in some sense a response to Olson is to say I agree with you, infants and people with dementia are persons and no new thing pops into existence when you get the Lockean capacities, but not just because there's a single human being but actually we're types of beings for whom the biological psychological and social aspects of our lives are so deeply intertwined and so mutually interdependent that they, in the ordinary case, cannot really be prized apart. But there are cases where they do start to come apart and those are the cases that have traditionally have been the cases of personal identity where questions get going, like the cases you talked about. The social part plays a huge role in the Person Life View (PLV), and so I would say in PLV that this is the same person because... I talk about person-space; the idea is that a culture is a kind of person-space where there are these modes of interaction, these integrated modes of interaction that *are people*; so I interact with individuals I know other individuals interact with them, there's a wide gamut of concerns and interactions I might have with a person or not but the person is somehow the *locus* of all of that. It occupies a place in social space and so obviously in these cases, like in *Away From Her* this is very distressing to the husband and we all understand why it's very distressing to the husband because this is his wife.

**And it's Julie Christie!**

And it's Julie Christie who no longer understands this or is acting in the ways we expect but we understand why she's not and we can't really get angry, and so on. Similarly, if it was just some other old lady in the nursing home who wanted to have a homosexual relationship with another woman in the nursing home the family wouldn't care, but that's *mom*! She doesn't do that! And similarly in the case of the vegetarian, it was in

“ The way in which *Staying Alive* is in some sense a response to Olson is to say I agree with you, infants and people with dementia are persons and no new thing pops into existence when you get the Lockean capacities, but not just because there's a single human being but actually we're types of beings for whom the biological psychological and social aspects of our lives are so deeply intertwined and so mutually interdependent that they, in the ordinary case, cannot really be prized apart. ”

## Philosophical Profiles

Sweden and he wanted the meatballs, and his wife was saying no he's such a committed vegetarian I can't see him do that. How you should actually respond to these people, whether it's right to prevent them from acting on their new very different personality...

**Would it be like taking away the car keys from a drunk person or is it something radically different from that?**

It possibly could be but it's not clear to me but I think this is a different question and there's a huge literature on it that I'm only partially aware of... It doesn't seem to me obvious that you *should* make the behavior of people with dementia comport with the behavior of the people before they had dementia rather than just letting them do what makes them happy now. It seems to me, this I would take from Olson, but again for different reasons; you can perfectly well say, "Dad was a committed vegetarian all those years and it breaks my heart to see him eating meat but all things considered given the state he's in now and how agitated he gets when we don't let him and how little time he has left to live and move on his behalf and made sure that it's responsibly sourced, humanely treated meatballs". This is the right thing to do. You don't have to say "this *isn't* Dad" to say that he should be allowed to eat meatballs.

**I think it gets more complicated if maybe he was a Hindu and he's eating cows now.**

It might be and then you might decide to do on his behalf is to keep him from doing it and, by the way, these particular people have the right to make that demand because that's their father who they have a lifelong relationship with and not because he's some other random person.

**I don't want my kids hearing that!**

Write out the instructions very carefully, that's my advice to you. It seems to me that the bulk of our practices supports the idea that this is the same person, it's just this is the same person in these very problematic, but not uncommon and not unpredictable situations.

**But in terms of narrative, is it just that their narratives took a strange turn? It sounds like previously they would have denied that it could be part of the narrative.**

Right so I would say it's not the same Lockean person unless the person is still quite high-functioning and has a really good story to tell about how, no my dementia has freed my mind from all those years of academic conditioning.

**"What a pious jerk I was back then!"**

Right, right, all those academics making me be vegetarian and now... But because we have a particular understanding of what dementia is and how it interferes with executive functioning, and so on, we have a perfectly good story to tell. So what I would say is: Olson says at some point, look, he thinks we are just human beings and human animals, but if you want a notion of person just know that it's not a thing. A person isn't a thing. I think a person is a thing but only this more basic sense of person. I'm willing to acknowledge that a Lockean person isn't an entity. So we can certainly say Dad's a different person now that he has dementia but I think our practice shows we don't really

“ It doesn't seem to me obvious that you should make the behavior of people with dementia comport with the behavior of the people before they had dementia rather than just letting them do what makes them happy now. ”

## Marya Schechtman

believe that, not only because we go to visit Dad instead of someone else but because we feel it's beholden on us if he's a lifelong Hindu not to let him eat beef. What I want to do now is distinguish between *self*, which is capturing what I was trying to get in the narrative view and *person*, which is this more social and biologically notion, but connects to self; not quite as a spider web but not completely unlike that.

### **Are there directions you're interested in going now? Is there a project you're currently working on? Or are you still recovering from the last book?**

No, I do have a project I'm hoping to get started on at least, I have some pieces and I'll even bring in, I know we don't have time to talk about (Galen Strawson's notion of) episodics we'll leave it for another day...what I want to do is go back to this notion of *self*, the phenomenological connection because I do feel I never really solved that problem to my satisfaction, I think the narrative view is a step in the right direction but I think there are all kinds of loose ends.

### **Like how long does a self exist for?**

That's a really good question. And what happens when you go to sleep, and so on? And what happens if you change dramatically? And that sort of thing. One of the ways I'm getting back into this—there has been a lot of pushback on the notion of narrative, some of it from Galen Strawson, who says "I have no narrative conception of my life, I'm an episodic, I live each episode as it comes, I don't think much about the past or future or how it all connects".

### **Do you buy that? I mean I think there's an obvious sense in which there are some people who are happy-go-lucky, or "I'm not going to feel guilty about that, sure I did something terrible when I was a kid, but that was a kid" but the whole "I" versus "I\*" business?**

I buy it and I don't and here's the way in which I finally figured it out, so I've gotten this far: It always seemed to me by the time you're sitting there saying "I am a happy-go-lucky person, I don't care about episodes, I've never cared about episodes, I've never cared about narratives, and I'm not going to care about narratives in the future" you've already told a story, so isn't that just showing that he really does have a narrative conception of self? And I've been able to have some back and forth with him and this is what I think: He says, "Look there's this conception of I\*, which is myself, and then there's this conception GS, which is Galen Strawson; I know I have a human history." Every time you press him and say, "but you talk about what happened in your past and how it would influence what you're doing now and you talk about where you want to go in the future.."

### **"You talk about how difficult you were for your dad (Peter Strawson)..."**

That's all GS, that's all about knowing about the history of Galen Strawson and it's what which allows him to know he has to pay the bills for the mortgage for the house that GS signed the contract on and he knows where to go home because that's all the history of GS. So I get one sense in which he means he's episodic and I certainly think I have experienced it myself, which is sometimes things that you know you did in the past just

“Olson says at some point, look, he thinks we are just human beings and human animals, but if you want a notion of person just know that it's not a thing. A person isn't a thing. I think a person is a thing but only this more basic sense of person. I'm willing to acknowledge that a Lockean person isn't an entity. What I want to do now is distinguish between *self*, which is capturing what I was trying to get in the narrative view and *person*, which is this more social and biologically notion, but connects to self; not quite as a spider web but not completely unlike that.”

## Philosophical Profiles

seem really remote, increasingly so. I can't think myself back into it. Yes, I know about it, but I have this distance that it's almost as if I'm hearing about someone else.

**And I'll say I like something and my sister will say, "You can't like that, you've always hated that!" and I say "People change".**

"Now I like it, but then I didn't." So *that* I understand. I tried once to develop this notion of empathic access, this idea that you can remember the past very well, I tend toward nostalgia so it bothers me but Strawson celebrates it...I remember how much fun I had with my friends in high school and how I listened to music with them and going back to the hippie-who-becomes-a-yuppie thing, I don't ever want to lose this and this...and now I think back and say yeah I was a teenager.

**There's some albums you should never listen to again as an adult.**

Right. But there's the difference between the way in which you are that person when you're listening to the album and it all comes rushing back in this pristine moment and the way you are that person when you're in the day-to-day life and you know you did this as a teenager and that was a million years ago. And I understand that difference and if that's the I\* difference, fine. But I've come to think that Strawson means something deeper by it because he, of course, wants us to be a metaphysical thing: and the way I would put it is this: he says the pronoun "I" is ambiguous between referring to *GS*, Galen Strawson, this thing that exists over time, and *him\** who is just right here. So when he says "I am this kind of philosopher," you don't know whether he means I\* or whether he means *GS* and he's fine with that, that "I" is two things. To me, I am *not* fine with that in the following sense: I can believe that I am an extended being who changes over time but then there's just one I, but that I am two things here, this self and also this also some extended thing seems very strange and also very alienating. The best example I can come up with is when he says: "I\* don't think I'm the guy who made that promise, but since I know *GS* did and I\* am also *GS* I better fulfill the promise," it's like saying "I don't really feel anything about these kids but I guess they're mine, so I'll raise them..."

“ I can believe that I am an extended being who changes over time but then there's just one I, but that I am two things here, this self and also this also some extended thing seems very strange and also very alienating. ”

**And suppose, as the example has been used, imagine you knew that some of your memories had been implanted, you just didn't know which ones: presumably he wouldn't care which ones.**

Right, right. What I think is there's some cheating going on because all the hard work is being sloughed off on this idea that there's this *GS* that can do all the work that every time you say, "But look you say this or that or the other which shows you have a narrative," he says "Well I\* don't have a narrative, *GS* has a narrative," or whatever. So there's that discussion and another piece and I'll go quickly to where I'm going in the future. The other piece of pushback against the notion of a narrative is: "No, our lives aren't anything like narratives, narratives are neat and tidy, they have exposition, crisis, and resolution and then they're done, and then they live happily ever after or not, but it's done, and all loose ends are tied up, and everything that happens in a narrative is there for an aesthetic purpose, so if you're reading a novel and it's foggy you should think about what that means about the state of the protagonist's soul, but if you go outside and it's foggy, you don't need to worry about what that means for your soul". Obviously a life is not like a literary narrative, so the pressure that also comes from Strawson, is "Well then, tell me how it *is* like a narrative in a way that is non-trivial". For

## Marya Schechtman

a while I thought I would just get rid of the notion of narrative, but finally what I decided is that what I want to do is explain what I mean by narrative and the way into it is this business about the ambiguity of "I\*" and "I," because Peter Goldie has very helpfully, in what is tragically his last book, explained the idea of narrative in terms of the ability to occupy multiple perspectives at once and Goldie and I disagree on a lot of things but what I think is wrong in Strawson's view is he thinks that you can just unproblematically occupy these multiple perspectives but what I think is that as persons or as selves in this case what we're left with is the task of seeing how they can all be *mine*. I have a lot of different perspectives, I know my current one is just one of many and I'll have future ones that will be different, I know I've had past ones that were different and yet somehow they're all mine. And I think that talking about how we negotiate that can help explain the phenomenology of our experiencing ourselves as extended in time. So really what I want to do is go back to that.

**And that makes me think of Nagel's discussion of the absurd, that's why human life is absurd because we can adopt two different viewpoints, the viewpoint of us in the car and the viewpoint from above looking down at the car. And it's because the mouse can't do that that its life is not absurd. So absurdity could be part of personhood!**

I think it very well might turn out to be.

**Well, I've kept you for way too long, so I'm going to thank you... I have more questions, so maybe we'll have to do this again!**

“ Peter Goldie has very helpfully explained the idea of narrative in terms of the ability to occupy multiple perspectives at once and what I think is wrong in Strawson's view is he thinks that you can just unproblematically occupy these multiple perspectives but what I think is that as persons or as selves in this case what we're left with is the task of seeing how they can all be *mine*. ”