

Maren Behrensen

*The State and the Self: Identity and Identities*

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Reviewed by Pieranna Garavaso, 2020

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Quote:

"The scholarship appealed to is broad-ranging, interdisciplinary, and inclusive of analytic, continental, and feminist philosophical traditions. Moreover, the author cites reports of real-life cases taken widely from media resources. This book demonstrates how philosophical analysis is relevant to significant real-life issues."

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This short yet wide-ranging book is a rewarding read; philosophers interested in current debates on the notions of personhood and personal identity and in the practical--that is, social, legal, and political--ramifications of these notions will find this book compelling and thought-provoking. The style is engaging and the abundance of real-life examples makes the discussion interesting; this is not to say that this book is devoid of theoretical grounding in the core texts of the debates on the above topics. Maren Behrensen clearly and effectively, although briefly, outlines major approaches to the definition of *person* and to the debate on the essential features of personal identity while defending "the recognition view," that is, a relational account of identity, one of whose necessary conditions is its construction within a social infrastructure. This review outlines the content of the chapters and concludes with a

recap of the main strengths of this work as well as with some suggestions concerning areas where there is need for further elaboration.

The first chapter, "The Metaphysics of Personal Identity," starts with the true story of Benjamin Kyle, an American man who suffered total amnesia and who for eleven years had no social identity, that is, no Social Security Number and no other identification document. Kyle was thus unable to work, use a library, rent an apartment, or buy a phone; in other words, he was unable to engage in many practices that are indispensable for participation in a human community: "identity is not a *fact* but a *practice*; . . . it is a necessary condition of our mental, physical and social existence as persons" (8). Behrensen connects her view with the definition of identity in terms of social recognition given by philosophers Marya Schechtman and Hilde Lindemann (Schechtman 1996; Lindemann 2014; Schechtman 2014). But whereas Schechtman and Lindemann focus on intimate, familial, and more restricted social contexts, Behrensen focuses on the role that "official identities, backed by state authority, play in practices of recognition" (8).

In this chapter, Behrensen outlines the major views on personhood and personal identity that are the basis of contemporary debates such as the Lockean--or more broadly, the views inspired by John Locke's linking of personal identity with self-consciousness and memory--Kantian, and animalist views (Locke 1975; Kant 1990; Olson 2007). The author also outlines and criticizes Derek Parfit's theses that (1) personal identity is not "what matters," but rather relation R or the continuity and connectedness of psychological facts such as memories, character traits, plans, or desires; and that (2) what matters should depend only on intrinsic (not extrinsic) properties of the subject (14) (Parfit 1984). The rejection of both these theses

is a theme that traverses the whole book. I will come back to Behrensen's portrayal of Parfit's positions at the end of this review.

The author correctly points out the presence of multiple definitions of *person* in the philosophical debates on personhood and personal identity and their impact on the difficulties of finding plausible solutions to puzzles and thought experiments (15). Furthermore, often the metaphysical discussion on personal identity purposely pays no or very limited attention to the moral, political, and legal import of this notion. In contrast to the so-called separatist views of Lockean, Kantian, and animalist theories, which claim that our confusion concerning the notion of a personal identity is grounded in our confusion concerning which notion of person is relevant to the philosophical debate about identity (16), Behrensen claims that "since our selfhood is embedded in our social world, so is our identity" (116). The notion of relationality appealed to in the narratives of the recognition view produces identities that transcend the sphere of individual social relationships and incorporate how state and legal systems establish and maintain social identities. Kyle's case shows that his (new) friends and relations were not enough in the absence of his memory and any legal or administrative trail of his life (8). The author calls these "official identities," which are necessary for working, being paid, traveling, marrying, signing contracts, voting, and other basic functions of social life (8). This chapter ends with a short section on attempts to resolve the issues surrounding personal identity by examining the use of personal pronouns, which usefully underlines the links between metaphysical debates and the philosophy of language.

The second chapter, "Narrativity and Normativity," is occupied mostly by replies to objections against narrative theories of personal identity. Behrensen first spells out her recognition view as also incorporating the feature of narrativity. Citing the views of Alasdair

MacIntyre and Schechtman (MacIntyre 1985; Schechtman 1996; 2014), the author synthesizes a narrative view as "an account of self and personal identity that is rooted in some sort of unifying narrative [that] can help us make sense of our actions, desires and memories" (36). Thus this chapter complements the previous statement of the author's view, which maintains that both the self and personal identity require a social structure and that they are constituted by a narrative constructed by social interactions with social, legal, and administrative dimensions and not merely by an individual's personal story.

Behrensen discusses three objections to narrative theories. The first is Galen Strawson's criticism that we are not all novelists or have a story about ourselves; here Behrensen brings to light the empiricist assumption at the basis of both David Hume's and Strawson's denial that there is a self: since we do not experience a (narrative) self, there is no such self (Hume 2000; Strawson 2004). Behrensen rejects this worry by revising the narrative thesis to include the effects of social bonds and contexts and by arguing that the resulting narrative self is not built merely by an individual narrator. The second objection raises an epistemic question: there can be many narratives; how do we decide which one to accept as authentic, true, or accurate? Here the author claims that social practices and contexts can help and recounts the case of Paolo Macchiarini, a fraudulent Italian surgeon, whose dangerous behavior went unchecked until people working in administrative structures successfully spotted the fraud (48ff.). Through this poignant example of a false narrative, possibly based on self-deception, the author replies to this second objection that in the recognition account, "no single identity narrative makes an identity" (51). Other relevant examples include trans and genderqueer identities, professional athletes, and refugees. The last section, "Dehumanization and Depersonalization," discusses the third objection, that is, what happens if the social structure does not recognize some beings as persons? Since for Behrensen social recognition is a

necessary condition for identity, if there is no social recognition, there is no personhood and no personal identity. In response to this objection, the author embraces another core feature of the recognition view, that is, its normative character: narratives are created in contexts in which various systems of social and legal discrimination operate, so the normative force of attributions of personhood and personal identity should be acknowledged and, when appropriate, become subject to moral evaluation.

The third chapter, "Identity and Modern Statecraft," draws from the work of political scientist James C. Scott, and the discussion focuses on applied aspects of the notion of identity to show the crucial social significance of the notion of person and personal identity (Scott 2008). Appealing to Michel Foucault's *Polizeiwissenschaft*, or "the science of policing," and to the contrast between *technologies of power* and *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1995), the author examines how administrative identity-management has developed "as an aspect of the history of modern technologies of the self" (60). In contrast to Foucault's and Scott's pessimistic discussions of the means by which states manage their citizens' identities--the suggestive title of Scott's cited work is *Seeing Like a State*--the author proposes that a state's tools for identifying and keeping track of its citizenry are also tools of autonomy for those citizens. The author provides detailed information about the custom of family names, Scandinavian *Personnummer*--an individual citizen's or legal resident's personal number used for tax purposes but also for health care, legal transactions such as buying a home or acquiring a passport -- as well as censuses, maps, passports, and museums. The variety of tools used by states to keep track of their citizenry both in Europe and North America is interesting. Two objections are mentioned: the protection of the privacy of individuals and the exclusion of individuals who cannot use these tools, such as exchange students, and more obviously, migrants, asylum seekers, immigrants, or displaced persons. Behrensen

acknowledges these concerns, especially with regard to tools that maintain personal information about the state's residents, such as the biometric technologies currently used to endow legal documents with chips containing data on the unique physical features of the holder. The distinctive feature of the chapter is the attempt to correct the common portrayal of these tools as mere instruments of political control and to bring to light the positive effects these tools may have for individuals. This discussion is further developed in the following chapter.

The fourth chapter, "Identity, Security and Trust," focuses on specialized archival knowledge and on how states "*create* a new identity for the infant--a new identity that will, under normal circumstances, become the basis of all other official identities the infant might acquire when they grow up" (85). Archival knowledge is highly "decontextualized," especially in contrast with the narrative knowledge at the basis of the identity arising from the stories that we and the people close to us create. The author stresses the importance of these official stories based on legal documents, biometrics, and other impersonal data "for a moral and practical understanding of personal identity"; these tools of social identity produce positive outcomes as they are "the means by which modern citizens assert their rights and claims against the state and its agents" (86). The author's criticism is not against the systems, but against how some groups of people end up excluded from such systems. In the ensuing discussion of the situations of refugees and gay and queer minorities, whose status-determination presents specific difficulties, Behrensen appeals to the contrast between foundationalist theories of justification, which require that the justification of a true belief be constituted by noninferential basic beliefs, and coherence theories of justification, which tie justification to the harmony of the beliefs held by an epistemic agent. The author also introduces the distinction among three types of trust, that is, epistemic, social, and electronic/digital, and

applies this distinction to the analysis of the work of border guards and their interaction with people crossing borders. In connection with trust, the chapter also analyzes nationalism and its role in producing "hypochondriac identities," according to which "[a]ny kind of difference--whether cultural, religious, or sexual--becomes an existential threat to the nation's integrity" (99). The chapter concludes by applying this conceptual framework to contemporary examples.

In the final, very brief, chapter, after a short summary of the contents of the book, the author reiterates its main positive message: "if we suppose that all identity management systems are informed by a political will to surveil and control, then we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to distinguish actors who use their power responsibly from those who do not" (117). In a book that discusses egregious cases of social discrimination and exclusion, this pragmatic and potentially fruitful approach gives a glint of hope on issues that often generate only Orwellian admonitions.

Behrensen's book offers an original approach to a set of philosophical debates that have not seen much progress in recent times; the contrast between psychological and physical criteria of personal identity, in their varied configurations, has produced multiple conceptions of persons and of their respective ties to their biological and bodily natures, but not any overwhelmingly persuasive account. The originality of Behrensen's approach lies in the determination not to separate the philosophical--and especially the metaphysical--reflection from the everyday life of human individuals and communities. The author outlines an adequate portrayal of current debates and their histories but transcends them by refusing to stop the reflection at the theoretical level and instead by tying it to moral, legal, and political issues. The scholarship appealed to is broad-ranging, interdisciplinary, and inclusive of

analytic, continental, and feminist philosophical traditions. Moreover, the author cites reports of real-life cases taken widely from media resources. This book demonstrates how philosophical analysis is relevant to significant real-life issues.

A different reader may not regard the above features of Behrensen's work as valuable; it might be objected that this work offers an example of applied philosophy or applied metaphysics and that as such it cannot be considered a contribution to the metaphysical debates on personhood and personal identity. I do not share this dichotomist approach to philosophical reflection and take Behrensen's work to be well grounded in theories and wholly relevant from a philosophical perspective. However, the effort of defining what is and what is not legitimately included in metaphysics, for example, with regard to the ontology of social constructs such as race and gender, has recently generated significant discussions (Barnes 2014; Mikkola 2017; Schaffer 2017, Sider 2017). It may be too much to expect a book like this both to put forward an original view on personal identity and to delve into the limits of metaphysics; yet a brief acknowledgment of this emerging debate would have been useful and appropriate, given that a certain conception of metaphysics is a core precondition of the approach taken by the author. A second possible complaint is, in my view, more appropriate: although the author does a good job understanding, outlining, and replying to the objections to the narrative view of personal identity, an independent argument to support this view is missing; the objections are addressed, but why is a narrative theory better than a purely biological or psychological theory in the first place?

Finally, although Parfit's view on personal identity and psychological continuity or relation R is adequately described, an argument is proposed (12) that allegedly captures the bulk of Parfit's views on personal identity. It is admirable to attempt to synthesize the thought of such



a core figure of the debate, but the given argument is not stated as a valid argument and includes premises that are themselves arguments--for example, premise 2--or that seem to already state (at least parts of) the conclusion.

These critical points do not seriously detract from the overall value of this book: it is an original, timely, and engaging contribution to the debate on personhood and personal identity. I am confident that it can be usefully used in undergraduate and early graduate courses; I hope also that it may be read by a broader public and successfully demonstrate that philosophy as a discipline and a practice is indeed relevant to our lives.

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