Personal Identity:
Schechtman, “Personhood and Personal Identity”

Negative argument:
Schechtman argues against the very possibility of defining psychological connectedness (and hence continuity) in such a way that does not presuppose facts about personal identity. That is, Schechtman thinks that psychological criteria cannot avoid the circularity objection. (Note the strength of the latter claim. It is not that psychological criteria do not meet, but rather that they cannot avoid, the circularity objection.)

Positive proposal:
A more fruitful direction for philosophical work on personal identity is to view persons as self-constituting entities.

1. Who Am I?

We must distinguish between the question of reidentification and the question of self-knowledge.

Question of reidentification: which history is my life a continuation of? This is a question of persistence over time (and the question that Parfit claims to be concerned with).

Question of self-knowledge: which beliefs, values and desires that I have are truly expressive of who I am? This is a question of ethical, or social identity, as I described it last week.

According to Schechtman, the problems that psychological theories encounter are due to their conflating these two questions.

2. Parfit Again

Parfit’s psychological criterion is reductionist. It is reductionist because he holds that:

1. The fact of a person’s identity over time just consists in the holding of certain more particular facts and
2. These facts can be described without either presupposing the identity of this person, or explicitly claiming that the experiences in this person’s life are had by this person, or even explicitly claiming that this person exists.

These facts can be described in an impersonal way

The circularity objection claims that psychological criteria are not, in the end, reductionist.

3. Schechtman’s Negative Argument

Quasi-states cannot do the work that they are supposed to do—i.e. avoid the circularity objection.

Distinction:
Memory: an apparent memory of an experience that one actually had
Delusion: an apparent memory of an experience that one did not have, that is taken (incorrectly) to be one’s own
Quasi-memory: an apparent memory (properly caused) and to hold no view about whose memory it is

Case of Jane and Paul: Jane has a quasi-memory of how a flash of lightning looked to Paul. “[W]e are really to think of Jane as having Paul’s memory exactly recreated, and, in regard to this one incident, experiencing exactly the inner state Paul would in a genuine memory” (43).

It is not the case, Parfit claims, that for Jane to be given Paul’s memory in this way she must mistakenly take it as her own—i.e. suffer a delusion.
Schechtman argues that Parfit is faced with a dilemma: Either (i) Jane’s q-memory (of Casey’s experiences) will have only the same visual content as Casey’s memory or (ii) it will be qualitatively exactly similar to Casey’s. Neither of these alternatives will allow quasi-memory to do the work it is supposed to do.

Why not?

If (i), then q-memory would not capture what is relevant to personal identity in genuine memory connections. It would be too ‘watered down’, we might say; there will be too many crucial elements will be missing in Jane. Given this, we have little reason to call what Jane experiences a quasi-memory of Casey’s experience.

If (ii), then Jane’s memory is delusional.

“The mineness of a psychological state cannot be separated from its content, and so, to define a state that can be properly called one of the states constitutive of personal identity, we will have to presuppose the existence of the a persistent person who is the subject of that state. This means that the strong noncircularity objection cannot be met, and so an analysis of personal identity of the type identity theorists [i.e. psychological criterion theorists] wish to give is not possible” (49).

4.
Schechtman’s Positive Proposal

What has gone wrong?

Two perspectives on persons:

i. Objective: we view persons as one of the types of objects in the world

ii. Subjective: we persons as subjects and agents, creatures with a way of experiencing the world and with affect and volition.

The two questions of personal identity come from these two perspectives. Question of reidentification from (i); question of self-knowledge from (ii).

Remember that Parfit is answering the question of reidentification. But, according to Schechtman, the methods he uses come from (i); but the intuitions he relies on come from (ii). (She suggests that only a body criterion can come from (i)).

“It is because psychological-continuity theorists are trying to force the insights gained from consideration of questions of self-knowledge and responsibility into the mold of questions of the persistence of material objects that they are forced to view psychological states as atomic, isolable, and in principle independent of the subject who experiences them—a view that I have argued to be highly implausible” (51).

A view of persons as self-constituting

Identity crises: occurs when a psychological state (or combination of states) do not cohere with a subject’s total psychology. As a result, a subject is unable to take such a state as a comprehensible part of his/her life and to take it to be his/her own.

We should take talk of identity crises literally. Persons are constituted by their own self-conceptions.

This fits nicely with the view of persons as self-conscious agents, capable of moral responsibility—one of the issues that motivates our examining questions of personal identity (over time) in the first place. Also, Schechtman argues that there is historical precedent for this kind of view—in particular, Locke who claims that a person is (among other things) a being that can “consider itself as itself” (53).