

Agency and Endurance
Marya Schechtman, University of Illinois at Chicago
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Extended Person Claim (EPC): To be a person one must see or conceive of oneself as a continuing being, persisting over time.

Basic Thesis: EPC is found in many philosophical discussions of personhood and personal identity, but has been challenged recently by Galen Strawson. I think there is something right in Strawson's claim, but that it does not undermine EPC as he claims. Instead it shows that there is an important ambiguity in the claim that needs to be clarified.

Keep in Mind: EPC says that we must perceive ourselves as persisting in order to be persons, and I will focus on that idea here. The question of whether we must actually persist as well is a different question, which I will address only briefly at the end.

1. Background: Challenge and Counter-Challenge

Strawson objects to narrative views of identity saying that they assume that what is true of some people (that they perceive themselves as continuing over time) is true of all people. **Diachronics** have this extended sense of self, but **Episodics** (e.g. Montaigne, Shaftsbury, Virginia Woolf, and Strawson) do not. Episodics experience themselves as distinct **self*s** from those who existed earlier in the human history of which they are a part, and who will be part of the continuation of that history in the future: an Episodic "does not figure [him]self, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future." (example: Henry James)

An objection from Kathleen Wilkes: Episodics would not be able to engage in the full range of human ethical activities or live a full human life. "Planning future actions, calculating consequences, experiencing remorse and contrition, accepting responsibility, accepting praise and blame ... Emotions such as love or hate, envy or resentment" all require that we "have a life, or self, with duration. We are, and must consider ourselves as, relatively stable intentional systems. Essentially." This is a version of EPC.

Strawson's Response: There is no reason one needs to see oneself* as extended in order to engage in these activities. All that is required is to realize that one is part of an ongoing human history and that this carries with it certain rights and obligations based on the actions and expectations of past and future self*s associated with that history.

2. The Need to Clarify

Rather than enter into the debate between Strawson and Wilkes directly, I suggest that it shows the need to clarify what EPC is really claiming. What does it mean to see yourself as continuing over time?

First note that Strawson does not actually offer a position according to which he has *no* sense of himself as continuing over time. He says that in addition to being himself* he is also the human Galen Strawson, “the continuing person and human being”, (which he designates as “GS”). So we do not need to see ourselves as continuing self*s, but we do need to see ourselves as continuing humans.

The idea seems to be that he in some sense thinks of himself as an extended being (GS) but does not experience himself as one. So the question is whether EPC holds that we must *experience* ourselves as continuing or must only *think* of ourselves as continuing. This is not clear in existing views, but I think the claim *should* require that we experience ourselves as continuing. Merely thinking of ourselves as continuing will not provide a picture of human agency.

3. The Difficulty of Clarifying

What is the experience of ourselves as continuing like?

Two initially attractive possibilities do not work:

(1) That we have direct access to temporally-remote portions of our human lives from the inside, as we do our present experience. This will not do because examples like the Henry James example show this is often not the case.

(2) That our basic values, commitments and personality traits remain stable over time. This does not work because it seems clear that we can change a great deal and remain the same persons in the relevant sense.

It seems that we need to describe a way of experiencing ourselves as continuing for the whole of a human life, a way which is different from the two just dismissed.

4, The Alternative

The problem of experiencing ourselves as continuing throughout our human lives despite the real differences between how we experience different temporal portions of our lives is not just a theoretical problem for philosophers, but an existential problem for humans.

Negotiating the tension between the pressure to see ourselves as continuing and experiencing ourselves as fractured is something with its own phenomenology, and this phenomenology *is* the kind of experience of ourselves that makes us persons.

The notion of narrative helps here. To engage a narrative, we must take multiple perspectives at once. We do this in our lives as well, holding both the temporally-local perspective, in which we are immediately engaged, and an extended perspective, from which we recognize this as

one perspective among others. This is not fractured consciousness, it is multiple perspectives within a single consciousness.

Examples:

Agnes' changing attitudes toward travel.

Lydgate's affair:

He knew that this was like the sudden impulse of a madman – incongruous with his habitual foibles. No matter! It was the one thing which he was resolved to do. He had two selves within him apparently, and they must learn to accommodate each other and bear reciprocal impediments. Strange that some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and awaits us. (182)

This form of consciousness is plausibly the kind that supports agency. It allows us to step back from our motivations and looks at them from a distance. It also provides a useful way to think about the complexities of the practical relations that define personhood for Locke. We can think of prudential reasoning as involving a conflict between two current desires, felt from two different perspectives, rather than a conflict between a current and temporally-remote desire. And we can gracefully express why we have less responsibility for past actions if we have changed a great deal since we took them, but have some responsibility nonetheless.