

PERSONAL IDENTITY
IN CHARLES HARTSHORNE'S METAPHYSICS

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According to Hartshorne, any changing yet enduring thing has two aspects: the aspect of identity (what is common to the thing in its earlier and later stages) and the aspect of novelty. A being which changes through all time has an identical aspect which is exempt from change. It is in this sense immutable. However, this unchanging identity should not be confused with a substantial soul. For Hartshorne, personal identity is an abstract aspect. He writes: "The same-self ego is an abstraction from concrete realities, not itself a concrete reality."¹ This is not to say that it is unreal, but it is real within something richer in determination than itself. Hartshorne explains that the T spoken by me is distinct from the T uttered by someone else because there is a different referent of the pronoun in each case. In the same, though subtler, way the T which I say now has a different referent from the T which I uttered earlier. The reason for the difference is that the pronoun T (or any of the personal pronouns) is a demonstrative and is context-dependent or token-reflexive; that is, the meaning changes each time it is used. There is, of course, an enduring individuality or a specific subject with definitive experiences. But each new

experience which the subject undergoes means a new actuality for that subject. The persistent identity itself is abstract while the actual subject having these experiences is concrete. Thus, there is a new I every moment and the T really means not just 'I as subject here' but also 'I now'.

In short, spatial and temporal considerations are intrinsic to one's concrete reality. The concreteness of the subject is due to the society or sequence of experiences of which the subject is composed. The referent of T is usually some limited part of that sequence of experiences. As Hartshorne puts it, "Personal identity is a partial, not complete, identity: it is an abstract aspect of life, not life in its concreteness."ⁱⁱⁱ This is why it would be erroneous to hold that each of us is always simply the same subject or the same reality even if we must admit that we are the same individuals. We are identical through life as human individuals, but not so in our concreteness. Concretely, there is a new man or woman each moment. To recognize the sameness of that man or woman, we must disregard that which is new at each moment.

Hartshorne furthermore differentiates personal identity from strict identity. Identity in its strict meaning connotes entire sameness, total non-difference, in what is said to be identical. If x is identical with y, then 'x' and 'y' are two symbols but with one referent. The difference between them is only the symbols or the act of symbolization, not in the thing symbolized. It follows that x does not have any property which y does not have and vice versa. Personal identity, on the other hand, is literally partial identity and therefore partial non-identity, the non-identity referring to the complete reality while the identity to a mere constituent. Personal identity is the persistence of certain defining

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characteristics in a very complex reality which constantly changes.ⁱⁱⁱ

Peter Bertocci agrees with Hartshorne that identity is never a strictly logical identity as attested by personal experience since one is self-identifying unity-continuity in change. Nevertheless, he has reservations over Hartshorne's statement that "reality is the succession of units" (i.e., actual entities or experient occasions). In Bertocci's view, this statement cannot be rendered coherent with personal self-conscious experience. Instead he argues that he experiences himself as a unity, a self-identifying continuant who can recognise and recall his own experiences as successive. He writes, "There is nothing in my synthesis of successive moments. I am indeed active in any moment, but I am neither a collection of moments nor a "synthesis".^{iv} Bertocci is voicing a basic epistemological and ontological disagreement. He questions the validity of Hartshorne's doctrine that the present contains the past — this doctrine, it was noted, complements Hartshorne's interpretation of human immortality and forms the basis for his version of personal identity -because there does not seem to be an experiential basis for this. Simply put, the past does not come into the present for it is gone forever. When it comes to personal identity, therefore, one cannot say that one is in one's past, but only in one's present. "The burning, present experience is a present complex unity that is able to identify itself as changing and successive... In a present [experience] I recognize aspects I describe as past, but my present is never an accumulation of pasts (hidden, distinct, or clear)."^v In short, Bertocci claims that one knows the past but this does not mean that the past itself exists.

Bertocci, it would appear, is equating experience with the substance theory. He himself wonders whether his present uneasiness with Hartshorne's theory is due to an obstinate residue of the psycho-logic of substantive metaphysics. In this respect, one could indeed ask whether Bertocci is justified in regarding the substantive theory as our experience of personal identity. After all, many others, notably the Buddhists, would have a different interpretation of their sense of personal identity. One suspects that the Western mind has been shaped mainly by Greek conceptions which makes it easy for some Westerners to accept them as indeed their experience. Robert Neville does acknowledge this point. In his criticism of Hartshorne's account of continuity, Neville writes that Hartshorne's event pluralism which is intended to account for continuity does not articulate "the Western's sense of individual continuity".^{vi} Both critics accuse Hartshorne's theory of not having a basis in experience. What is surprising about their criticism is that some have rejected the substance theory precisely because it does not seem to square with personal experience. The Buddha had rejected the Hindu doctrine of Self (although this is not the same as the substantial self) because he could only experience momentary, transitory states, which he regarded as constituting 'the self'. David Hume was critical of the classical notion of 'soul' since according to him there was nothing in our experience to support it. The point at issue here is: which aspects of our experience can justifiably serve as the basis for philosophical thinking? The more crucial question then is: what exactly do we mean by experiencing ourselves as subjects? The answer to that question will shape our response to Hartshorne's theory of personal identity.

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Henson is of the opinion that Hartshorne has not really explored the possibility of a notion of self-identity that is not the same as the substantial self that he is critical of. He claims that Hartshorne "seems to be in danger of making selfhood, a concrete dimension of experienced reality, into an empty — hence unreal - abstraction".^{vii} Henson's question as to whether one cannot uphold a third alternative to the classical notion and to Hartshorne's interpretation of personal identity remains.

NOTES

ⁱ Hartshorne. *The Development of Process Philosophy*. in: E.H. Cousins (ed.). *Process Theology: Basic Writings*. N.Y.: Newman Press, 1971. P.56.

ⁱⁱ Hartshorne, *Beyond Enlightened Self-interest: a Metaphysics of Ethics*, p.302.

ⁱⁱⁱ 3 Hartshorne, *Strict and Generic Identity: an Illustration of the Relations of Logic to Metaphysics*, in: H.M. Kallen et al. (eds.). *Structure, Method and Meaning: Essays in Honor of Henry M. Sheffer*, N.Y.: Liberal Arts Press, 1951, p.26. See also his: *Personal Identity from A to Z*, in: *Process Studies*, II. 1972, pp.209-215.

^{iv} Bertocci P., *Hartshorne on Personal Identity: a Personalistic Critique* in: *Process Studies*, II. 1972. p.217.

^v *Ibid.* p.219.

^{vi} Neville R. *Neoclassical Metaphysics and Christianity* in: *International Philosophical Quarterly*, X. 1969. P.56.

^{vii} Henson, *Immortality in the Thought of Charles Hartshorne*, p. 142