

## RIGHTS USAGE AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of J.P. Moreland and of his website [www.jpmoreland.com](http://www.jpmoreland.com).**
- **It has been made available for your individual and personal usage.**
- **If you quote from it, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this file to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **To reproduce it for 2 or more people, please seek permission by contacting [www.jpmoreland.com/contact](http://www.jpmoreland.com/contact)**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to [www.jpmoreland.com](http://www.jpmoreland.com)!***

# An Enduring Self: The Achilles' Heel of Process Philosophy

J. P. Moreland

It is well known that the various forms of process thought are agreed in denying the existence of an enduring self which maintains absolute identity through change.<sup>1</sup> Process thought—regardless of whether time is taken to be continuous or discreet, or whether one holds to an A series or B series view of time—is committed to some form of ancestral chain model of the self wherein the self is a series of interrelated actual occasions in which earlier occasions are prehended by later members of the chain to form a serial nexus. There is no stable essence running through all members of the chain; the “persistent” self is a derived unification of momentary selves.

For example, over a decade and a half ago *Process Studies* contained a well-known exchange between Charles Hartshorne and Peter Bertocci over the issue of personal identity (see PI, HPI). Hartshorne likened his view of the self to that of historical Buddhism. The self is a society, a stream of consciousness, formed by a synthesis of experient occasions, analogous to momentary human experiences which occur at, roughly, 10-20 per second. A present, actual occasion contains or houses its past occasions as its data, and thus, the subjectivity or present immediacy of a present actual occasion has those past occasions as its objects.

In this article, I want to argue that this model of the self is the Achilles' heel of process philosophy by presenting and clarifying a Kantian style argument for an enduring I. When one is dealing with basic, metaphysical questions, like the nature of the self, there are two general strategies to follow. First, one can appeal to a basic intuition of the thing in question and ask others to “look” at the phenomenon itself. Now, when it comes to the self, my intuitions are along the lines of Edmund Husserl and Thomas Reid. In successive moments of experience, I not only have an awareness of those successive experiences, but I also am aware of an I which is identical in each moment and which is identical to my current self. I individuate myself prior to the individuation of my acts of experience or the objects which transcend and yet are embedded in those acts.

This strategy of directly appealing to experience itself is the approach employed by Bertocci in his response to Hartshorne. Time and again he rests his case against Hartshorne on appeals like the following: “In my person-al, noninstantaneous direct experience, I do not find that I am a succession of units. I am a self-identifying unity who can recognize and recall his own experiences as successive” (HPI). This is roughly the same line of approach taken by Roderick Chisholm. He says, “‘How do I know that “I” is not ten thinkers thinking in union’? The answer, I would say, is this: We know it in the same way as we know that there is at least one thinker” (FP 89).

Now it does seem to me that our immediate awareness of our own self and its experiences shows us that the process of unification is really an abstraction from the acts of unification done by a unified being. Unfortunately, such appeals can be called question-begging or simply denied. Instead of pursuing this dialectic further, I will take a second strategy in arguing for an enduring I—I will try to show that the denial of such a self inexorably leads to unacceptable conclusions.

## THE ARGUMENT

The argument to be presented finds its classical expression in Kant's paralogisms, especially the third, and it has been emphasized in recent years by H. D. Lewis (SI 32-37; IS 47-49) and A. C. Ewing (VR). Let us call this the Epistemological Argument. Here is Ewing's statement of it:

To realize the truth of any proposition or even entertain it as something meaningful the same being must be aware of its different constituents. To be aware of the validity of an argument the same being must entertain premises and conclusion; to compare two things the same being must, at least in memory, be aware of them simultaneously; and since all these processes take some time the continuous existence of literally the same entity is required. In these cases an event which consisted in the contemplating of A followed by another event which consisted in the contemplating of B is not sufficient. They must be events of contemplating that occur in the same being. If one being thought of wolves, another of eating, and another of lambs, it certainly would not mean that anybody contemplated the proposition 'wolves eat lambs' . . . There must surely be a single being persisting through the process to grasp a proposition or inference as a whole. (VR 84)

*An Ethical Analogy*

Since epistemic considerations bear an analogy to moral considerations, e.g., there are moral duties to act and epistemic duties to believe, there is moral praise for responsible behavior and epistemic praise for rational behavior, it may be helpful to clarify the epistemological argument with an ethical analogue (cf. IdSe 13-16).

Our basic intuitions about responsibility and punishment seem to presuppose an enduring I. In normal cases, we do not hold someone responsible for another's actions nor do we punish someone for another's immoral deeds. But if an ancestral chain model of the self is true, then when a person does an immoral deed at time  $t_1$ , if we punish a person-stage in the "same" chain at time  $t_2$ , later than  $t_1$ , we are not really punishing the responsible agent who did the deed at  $t_1$ . At best, we are punishing a Döppelgänger. So if identity is a fiction, then the notion of responsibility for past wrongs loses its foundation.

Similarly, it is hard to see how one could be justified in fearing the future on an ancestral chain model. Why should I fear at  $t_1$  going to the dentist at  $t_2$ ? In reality, the future pain at  $t_2$  will be had by someone whose psychological connections with me are only remote. My present fear is not a fear of someone else being in pain, even if that person looks like me and has certain personality traits and memories similar to mine. My present fear is about the pain that *I* will experience at  $t_2$ .

The point here is not about the relative merits of altruism towards others *vis a vis* self-concern. Hartshorne argues that his model of the self offers a way of grounding altruism just as directly as self-interest (PI 213). Since there is no numerical identity between the various selves in the same ancestral chain, I look back upon past experiences and forward to future ones with both altruistic and self-interested feelings. Similarly, I look back upon and forward to the experiences of others. In fact, says Hartshorne, there is no absolute difference between the two cases.

The force of my arguments about past responsibility or future fear is not essentially one of grounding altruism or appropriate self-interest, which I would ground in the metaphysical claim that all humans have the same essence which



constitutes their unity as a class called by Kant the kingdom of ends. Rather, the point I am making is that there is simply a difference between being responsible for a past act or fearing a future experience in which I myself was or will be involved as opposed to those involving someone else, regardless of how much that other person shares similarities with me. *Prima facie*, it is hard to believe that there is no absolute difference between the two cases.

It is possible to respond to these arguments by saying that our basic intuitions need to be revised so as to be in keeping with a "loose and popular" sense of identity and not a "strict and philosophical" sense, to use Bishop Butler's terminology. Perhaps we can ground punishment in deterrence, protection of society, or in some weaker sort of responsibility and continuity compatible with an ancestral chain model. Perhaps all we need for the rational justification of future pain is the belief that it will be unpleasant for someone who will have my present memories. Whatever the specifics of such a program, one thing seems clear. An ancestral chain model is committed to some sort of replacement of our common sense intuitions about these matters with some weaker sorts of intuitions which are compatible with that model of personal identity and which are not too unlike those common sense intuitions.

But those deliberations about past responsibility and future pain, helpful as they are, do not take us to the heart of a moral analogue to the epistemological argument. If an ancestral chain model is correct, then moral actions themselves do not exist. For moral actions have, among other things, a beginning initiated in keeping with a moral intention, intermediate means to the moral end, and an end which is the action intended. A moral action is a temporal unity which spans a duration longer than a temporal atom and which finds its unity in the same self who is present at the beginning of the action as intentional agent, during the action as guider of means to ends, and at the end of the action as responsible actor. Here, unification is constituted by sameness of the self. A specious present cannot be stretched to accommodate such moral actions without reaching the breaking point, especially when we remember Hartshorne's statement that roughly 10-20 actual occasions occur each second.

### *The Epistemological Argument*

It is possible to understand the epistemological argument in terms of past responsibility in violating our epistemic duties or future fear of irrationality. Thus, on an ancestral chain model, no one could literally be faulted at time  $t_2$ , later than  $t_1$ , for holding to an irrational belief at  $t_1$ . Similarly, there would be little motivation to study, say from fear of irrationality, since the person at  $t_2$  who benefits from such acts would not be the person at  $t_1$  who began to study. So if identity is a fiction, then epistemic responsibility for past wrongs, and epistemic fear of future irrationality would be without sufficient foundation.

It may be possible to respond to such problems, by revising our common sense notions of epistemic responsibility and irrationality. Such a program could draw encouragement from either attacks against traditional conceptions of rationality, e.g., foundationalism, normative rationality, and internalism, which replace those conceptions with conceptual relativism, hermeneutics, and so forth (cf. PMN, especially 131-212).

But these deliberations, as helpful as they are, do not take us to the heart of the epistemological argument for an enduring I. According to the epistemological

argument, on the ancestral chain model one cannot have full-blown epistemic acts wherein a chain of reasoning in thought *through* and a conclusion *drawn*. Indeed, according to Ewing's statement above, one could not even attend to a very complicated proposition, for such an act requires a period of time wherein the same self is present at the beginning and the end of the process. The simple fact is, that it seems to take time for the self to grasp a complex proposition or argument.

Suppose someone were thinking through the chain of reasoning in the following syllogism:  $[(P \rightarrow Q) \ \& \ P] \rightarrow Q$ . In order for the inference to be drawn, the same self must be present throughout the process. This self attends first to the major premise, then the minor premise, and finally, draws the conclusion by holding the two premises together and seeing their connection. The point is not that the logical relations which obtain among propositions are themselves temporal. Rather, the processes of thought in acts of knowing are such that they take time to think through and they involve an enduring self to hold the terms together and draw inferences.

In the quote above, Ewing makes the same point with reference to the process of entertaining a proposition and making it meaningful to the self. Understanding the proposition "wolves eat lambs" requires attending to the subject, the direct object, and the transitive verb. As Frege pointed out, propositions are unities or wholes which cannot be identified with a mere heap of semantic parts. Similarly, attending to a proposition requires a unified act of consciousness for a single self and such an act cannot be identified with a mere heap of successive temporal moments attended to by person-stages.

Again, consider the origin and content of our concept of number. Edmund Husserl gave a detailed analysis of the course of experience through which we come to have the concept of a totality of things, i.e., number. Dallas Willard summarizes one stage of Husserl's analysis as follows:

How do the relevant conceptual objects, concrete multiplicities, come intuitively before us? The answer is, that when things are separately and specifically noticed in acts which, though distinct, are unified and ordered by a characteristic enumerative interest or purpose, the primary contents (*sensa*) corresponding to the things are caught up in the overarching act to form a whole representation (in the sense of an intentional object) on the basis of which an objective, real, multiplicity intuitively appears. The individual *sensa* involved are grasped as 'together' by a reflexive—though marginal and pre-propositional—awareness of their involvement in one continuing sequence of acts directed, not upon the *sensa* themselves, but upon the objects enumerated. But given their unification in this manner, along with the guiding interest in numbering the objects concerned, the totality of objects does in fact appear to us as one intuitive whole in which the unifying relations ("collective combinations") may be *seen* to be exactly what they are. (LOK 61)

In order to illustrate this, suppose one were going to count ten dots on a sheet of paper. One would begin such a process with an intent or interest to enumerate the dots in an ordered sequence. This would initiate a sequence of specific acts of separately noticing specific dots, say as one's gaze moved from the left to the right of the paper. In this process a new and distinct type of whole becomes present to me—a concrete number of *x* objects. There is more to such a whole *qua* totality or multiplicity of objects than its elements, *viz.* its unification, and this unification is accomplished by an enduring agent.

At each stage in the process of counting, through a serial intuitive enumeration, I am able to consider each element of the totality noticed up to that point as a



separate and specific dot, and then each dot must be seen as one so noticed in relation to the others so noticed. If I have counted five dots on the left, I am able to form a totality of five dots which *have been* counted by me, separate that totality from the number of dots still to be counted, and continue to add dots to the multiplicity already noticed as the count continues. Thus, during the process of counting, I must not only have successive acts wherein I notice the dots, but I must also have successive acts wherein I have a second order act of noticing which forms into a unified multiplicity the various individual acts of noticing dots up to that point.

So the process of counting the ten dots is a complex act which has the same self at the beginning and the end of the act. This self initiates the process with an enumerative interest, sequentially notices individual dots, holds together sequentially emerging totalities of acts of noticing, and completes the count by seeing the totality of objects as one intuitive whole.

As a final example, consider another observation made by Husserl about the fulfillment structure which obtains between and among various experiences.<sup>2</sup> We are all aware of the difference between the mere representing of an object to consciousness by thinking about it, and the direct intuition of the object itself which is the fulfillment of the former. Suppose I am in the living room and I am thinking about a cherry pie on the kitchen table. At this point I am merely representing the pie to myself, perhaps by using various *sensa* of previous pies or the sought-after pie experienced earlier. When I walk into the kitchen, I begin to have a succession of experiences of the pie which replace one another sequentially as I approach the pie. If the kitchen is large and the lights are very dim, I may begin with an intuition of a fuzzy, roundish shape that is somewhat grey. But finally, I have the experience of intuiting the object as it is in itself. In such an act, I can hold before my consciousness my initial representation of the pie and the successive experiences on my way into the kitchen (and I am aware of them as *being past* and as *having been present* to me), and I can recognize that the direct intuition of the pie is the fulfillment of the prior experiences.

Such acts of fulfillment are complex wholes or processes which seem to require an enduring self to make sense of them. The self seems to move through the various stages of such experiences and to hold them together in larger and larger unities until, finally, the end of the sequence is seen to fulfill the representation at the beginning of the experience.

It is not clear to me what the details would be in a process rejoinder to the epistemological argument. In my opinion, we do not have a successful process account of the self which survives the epistemological argument. Such an account would have to take acts of knowing like those listed above and explain them in a way which is compatible with an ancestral chain model of the self. But I think the general line of approach is clear enough. As each new self in the chain emerges and ceases to be, it passes on to later selves not only its content, but also the feeling of ownership.<sup>3</sup> That is, later selves appropriate in memory the content and the feeling that the content is *mine* from earlier selves.

One final point should be mentioned here. If later selves have content in them that resembles the content in earlier selves, then by an argument made familiar by Bertrand Russell, this resemblance would seem to require grounding in a monadic or dyadic universal which is a multiply exemplifiable entity in each, perhaps the relation of resemblance itself.<sup>4</sup> In order to be veridical, my present memory of a past experience must have identical qualities instanced in it as were instanced in the past experience when it was present. In order to deny this conclusion, one can say that the two experiences are merely similar. But this simply results in postulating

the universal Similarity Itself. Either way, such an entity would be a Platonic universal, the classic exemplar of being. While such an argument does not prove an enduring I, nevertheless, if Platonic universals are required to make sense of successive states of consciousness, then this would present a problem for process philosophy.

But universals aside, if a chain of thought is very complicated, then it seems that a period of time is required for the self to undergo reflection along such a chain. On the ancestral chain model we are considering, whatever self would be required to appropriate the earlier mental contents would certainly seem to have his work cut out for him. For he would have before his momentary gaze a very complex whole of constituent propositions, experiences, and the like. And the same problem would seem to recur all over again, for time would surely be needed in order to attend to such a complex whole. The ancestral chain model would be stretching the spacious present to the breaking point.

In the case of the moral analogue to the epistemological argument, a defender of the process view of the self could dismiss moral acts altogether. Such a move might be distasteful and highly counterintuitive. But that fact alone would not undercut the intelligibility of process metaphysics. But a similar move does not seem available to someone who is confronted with the epistemological argument. As Paul Weiss pointed out:

If nothing can occupy our attention for a while, we could have only momentary contents; if nothing has occupied our attention for a while we could have had only momentary contents. But if we are presented with any evidence, that evidence could not be known without our holding it before us for a while, so that the very presentation of the evidence designed to show that nothing occupies our attention for a span of time would be evidence to show that something does . . . . For something to be had as evidence it must be attended to for a time. To attend to it we must continue to be. As soon as we confront any evidence, therefore, no matter what it claims to support, we know that it will support the truth that something endures. (MB 243-244)

In short, the epistemological argument, if successful, shows that the denial of an enduring self is guilty of self-referential inconsistency. There may be a successful account of acts of knowing within a Whiteheadian ancestral chain model which avoids the force of the epistemological argument. But if no such account is available, then the enduring self may, indeed, be the Achilles' heel of process metaphysics.<sup>5</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- FP—Roderick Chisholm. *The First Person*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981.
- HPI—Peter Bartocci. "Hartshorne on Personal Identity: A Personalistic Critique." *Process Studies* 2 (Fall 1972): 216-221.
- IdSe—Geoffrey Maddell. *The Identity of the Self*. Edinburgh: The University Press, 1981.
- IS—H. D. Lewis. *The Illusive Self*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.
- LOK—Dallas Willard. *Logic and the Objectivity of Knowledge*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1984.
- MB—Paul Weiss. *Modes of Being*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958.



- PI—Charles Hartshorne. "Personal Identity from A to Z." *Process Studies* 2 (Fall 1972): 209-215.
- PMN—Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- SI—H. D. Lewis. *The Self and Immortality*. New York: Seabury Press, 1973.
- VR—A. C. Ewing. *Value and Reality*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a good discussion of absolute and relative identity, see David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1-74. While I agree with Wiggins in holding to the sortal dependency of identity, my argument in this paper does not depend on such an understanding. My epistemological argument is compatible with a Lockean understanding of substance with the I as some sort of bare particular or *hacceitas*.

<sup>2</sup>For a helpful treatment of the ontology of knowing acts in Husserl, including the notion of foundation, see Dallas Willard, "Wholes, Parts, and the Objectivity of Knowledge," in *Parts and Moments: Studies in Logic and Formal Ontology*, ed. Barry Smith (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1982), 379-400.

<sup>3</sup>For two examples of this strategy, see Eugene Fontinell, *Self, God, and Immortality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 85-89; and Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1981), 71-114.

<sup>4</sup>I have surveyed arguments for universals from similarity in my *Universals, Qualities, and Quality-Instances* (Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1985), 109-133.

<sup>5</sup>I wish to thank Lewis Ford and David Beck for their helpful comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this article.