**Persons and Processes: When do we begin?**

**MAWM**

 **October 7, 2017**

**Marya Schechtman**

**Target Question**: When do we – beings, like us, human persons – begin to exist? This question has been addressed in a variety of different contexts, receiving a great deal of attention, for instance, in bioethics. It has received surprisingly little attention, however, in conjunction with questions of personal identity. In this talk I will examine the question of our origins through the lens of the personal identity debate.

**Basic Conclusion:** I will use this examination to argue that sociocultural features have a role to play in determining when beings like us begin, and that there is the possibility that the answer to this question could, subject to significant constraints, be different in different sociocultural contexts.

**Basic Hope:** That an articulation of these constraints together with a deeper understanding of the nature of the question, will make the basic conclusion seem less implausible than it might at first.

**1. Brief (and Selective) Background of the Personal Identity Debate**

1. The two main views – Psychological Accounts and Biological Accounts (“Animalism”)
2. Neither of these views has a straightforward concrete answer to the question of when beings like us begin to exist (for somewhat different reasons).
3. Both assume that that the answer to the question of when one of us begins depends upon intrinsic features, i.e. one of us begins to exist when we can first individuate something with particular intrinsic attributes.

**2. An Alternative Approach**

1. Animalists understand beings like us in terms of an ongoing biological life.
2. I take up the idea that we should be understood in terms of our lives, but say that the conception of *life* animalists employ is too narrow. Behavioral and social facts must also be included.
3. For humans, social facts include the role of culture in shaping our activities and development. This is an anthropological view in which we are beings shaped by ongoing bio/psycho/social interactions mediated by a cultural framework. Sociocultural features play a role in individuating beings like us and determining our persistence conditions.

**3. Constraints on Social Influence**

1. It occurs at the level of socio/cultural infrastructure and not individual interaction.
2. It is constrained by biological and other empirical facts.
3. Human cultures automatically must accord typical adult humans this role.
4. There is *some* wiggle room at the endpoints.

**4. Entity-Constituting Processes**

1. Class of integrated physical loci that rely upon an ongoing process to maintain integrity
2. Such entities/loci are inherently diachronic.
3. Questions about the origins of such loci seek to distinguish between pre-conditions and the beginning of the process proper.
4. Humans belong to the class of entities constituted by processes.

**5. The Role of Culture in the Origins of Entities Constituted by Processes**

1. Question of when process begins cannot be settled decisively by empirical or metaphysical investigation.
2. The question is when it first becomes appropriate to view and treat something as an entity of a particular kind.
3. The answer to this question is partly a function of the technological and theoretical state of the culture in which it is raised.
4. Examples help show how this is plausibly so: Storms and Cancer
5. Application to humans
6. The role of sociocultural features is limited to early origins, and responsive to genuine differences in the career of the entity in different contexts.

**6. Remaining Concerns**

1. Triviality: This is just a sematic dispute. This presupposes an undefended metaphysics.
2. Implausibility: If it is not trivial, multiple counterexamples can be raised against the claim. These are not so forceful if we remind ourselves of what question we are asking.
3. Some cultures have unsettled infrastructure. In those cultures there is no fact of the matter.

**7. Useful Insight**

This analysis will not yield a complete answer to the question of when one of us begins, but it does help us to understand better the nature of the question, and the kind of dispute that the dispute over origins is. It suggests that rather than trying to resolve practical and ethical questions by first resolving metaphysical ones, for particular kinds of concerns, like the origins of beings like us, we must often proceed the other way around.