

INTRODUCTION

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Exploring Personal Identity. Philosophical Perspectives and Insights from the Arts

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EXPLORING PERSONAL IDENTITY. PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHTS FROM THE ARTS

Personal identity has long stood at the crossroads of some of philosophy's most vexed questions. What makes a person the same over time? What constitutes the unity of selfhood amid the flux of experience, the transformations of the body, and the shifting social worlds in which each of us is embedded? Philosophy has approached these questions from multiple angles—metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic. Yet new and pressing questions continue to emerge, particularly in light of contemporary challenges to the very notion of personhood: the rise of artificial intelligence, the politicization of identity, the fragility of memory and embodiment, and the pluralization of gender and social belonging.

This special issue of *Phenomenology and Mind* gathers a selection of contributions that engage with this multifaceted debate. The aim is not to provide a unified or definitive theory of personal identity, but rather to illuminate its constitutive tensions and its manifold developments. The collection brings together phenomenological analyses of subjectivity and embodiment; investigations into the relationship between self and experience, as well as mind and brain, in the process of perceiving one's own identity and personal agency; feminist analyses of gender identity and gendered language; and, finally, aesthetic approaches that view art as both expressing and reshaping identity. By integrating these different perspectives, what emerges is a dynamic framework of analysis that connects self-awareness, affectivity, political action, and creative expression.

**1. Rethinking
Personhood:
From Substance to
Relation**

Contemporary philosophy has definitely shifted its focus from an isolated, interiorized ego to the being-in-the-world of a lived, embodied subject. The self is no longer conceived as a fixed essence, but as an open horizon of meaning constituted through experience, language, and social interaction. This shift marks a move from what a person is to how personal identity is constituted. The phenomenological approach emphasizes that personal subjectivity is constituted first of all through first-person lived experience: bodily, emotional, practical, and evaluative. The person appears as a unity of sense (*Sinneseinheit*) grounded in intentional life, yet never reducible to a mere psychological continuity or a metaphysical substrate. Through affectivity and value-experience, as Max Scheler¹ and Edith Stein² suggested, one's

1 See: M. Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*. Translated by Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973; Id., *The Nature of Sympathy*. Translated by Peter Heath. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers (now Routledge), 2008; Id., *The Human Place in the Cosmos*. Translated by Manfred S. Frings. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009.

2 See: E. Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*. Translated by Waltraut Stein. 3rd revised edition. Washington, D.C.: ICS

individuality takes form not only through reflection but through the very acts of loving, valuing, and willing that express one's "personal center." In this sense, the inquiry into personal identity is inseparable from the study of how we relate to the world and to others. Personal identity thus emerges in an embodied dialectic between self-constitution and intersubjective recognition, between interiority and exposure, constancy and change.

Edoardo Fugali defends the thesis that both self-awareness and world-awareness are inherently embodied and argues that the first-person perspective (FPP) is grounded in the body's role as the zero-point of an oriented spatial field. Selfhood thus arises from the embodied "I can," not from conceptual reflection. Against representational and linguistic accounts that reduce the FPP to ownership of experiences or to conceptual self-reference, Fugali shows that it originates from the bodily structure of perception and action. Through a detailed dialogue with De Vignemont, Baker, and Zahavi, the paper argues that bodily ownership and agency are not independent of the FPP but rather presuppose it. The lived body provides the fundamental frame through which the subject perceives and acts, generating a pre-reflective self-awareness that is prior to any epistemic or linguistic act. Critiquing intellectualist models that define selfhood in terms of higher-order thought, Fugali reinstates embodiment as the primordial locus of first-person givenness. His phenomenological approach reveals that the FPP is not an abstract mental stance but a structural feature of the lived body's sensorimotor intentionality.

Sofia Livi proposes an original contribution to rethinking personhood by grounding selfhood in the lived and sensory dynamics of the body. Moving beyond the narrativist view of the self as a reflective or linguistic construct, Livi examines how respiration and olfaction, two often overlooked modalities, participate in the pre-reflective constitution of personal identity. Through the notion of posture, she articulates a phenomenology of the body that unites the literal configuration of movement with the affective and cognitive stance by which subjects inhabit the world. Breathing and smelling are not just physiological functions, but expressive dimensions of the self, because they shape the way we perceive, feel, and orient ourselves spatially and emotionally. Livi's analysis highlights that perception is never anonymous, but it bears the imprint of an embodied style, a distinctive way of being in the world. By integrating proprioception, affectivity, and atmosphere, she exemplifies how personal identity unfolds in the relational field between body and world.

Stavros Panayiotou presents a profound ethical reconsideration of what it means to be a person, challenging the criterialist view dominant in analytic metaphysics. Criterialism defines personhood through a specific set of psychological or behavioral properties, rationality, self-consciousness, volition, and communication, that are both necessary and sufficient for being a person. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, Panayiotou argues that such ontological definitions reduce the person to an object of classification and thereby overlook the ethical foundation of selfhood. For Levinas, personhood does not arise from possessing mental or moral capacities but from the asymmetrical relation of infinite responsibility toward the other. Panayiotou's reading of Levinas defines personhood as relational and non-reciprocal: the self is constituted through responsibility rather than autonomy, through exposure to alterity rather than reflexive self-knowledge. The author thus situates ethics before ontology: the human person is not primarily a rational substance, but an ethical event, an opening brought about by the

Publications, 1989; Ead., *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*. Translated by Mary Catharine Baseheart and Marianne Sawicki. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000; Ead., *The Complete Works – Critical English Edition*, vol. 12. Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications / The Catholic University of America Press, 2024.

encounter with the other. This encounter takes on the characteristics of a calling, a taking of a stand that grounds every possible articulation of identity.

2. Metaphysical Questions about Mind, Brain, and Self

Within analytic and philosophy of mind traditions, the problem of personal identity has often been cast in terms of its persistence across time and change and its relation to experience. Competing models, as psychological continuity, bodily continuity, narrative identity, animalism, and constitution theory, have sought to capture the conditions of personal persistence, each revealing different aspects of what “being the same” entails. At the same time, investigations on personhood and the relationship between the self and experience continue to be at the center of an ongoing debate that intersects philosophy of mind, phenomenology and even bioethics, as exemplified by some of the interdisciplinary contributions to this section.

Andrea Bottani challenges one of the central dichotomies structuring contemporary debates on personal identity—the opposition between reductionist (“complex”) and anti-reductionist (“simple”) views of persons. While this contrast has long been regarded as decisive for understanding the metaphysics of the self, Bottani argues that its significance has been overestimated. He maintains that, although the distinction between reductionist and anti-reductionist frameworks may hold meta-metaphysical relevance, it does little to illuminate the substantive nature of persons or the conditions of their persistence through time. By disentangling questions of personal identity from this entrenched opposition, Bottani invites a reassessment of what truly matters in metaphysical accounts of the self, shifting the focus from abstract structural debates to the substantive questions about the nature and persistence of persons themselves.

Alberto Barbieri offers a rigorous critique of one of the dominant paradigms in contemporary philosophy of mind: the state self-awareness view (SSV), according to which the subject’s inner awareness of experience is grounded in the experience’s awareness of itself. The author argues that all versions of this theory fail to convincingly explain how a relation at the level of mental states can generate a subject-level phenomenon, such as for-me-ness. The so-called “problem of state awareness” reveals a fundamental explanatory gap: if consciousness is defined by the subject’s being aware of its own states, it cannot be reduced to those states being aware of themselves. The paper reorients the discussion toward a view that treats inner awareness not as a reflexive property of mental states but as a primitive relation entertained by the subject. In doing so, it bridges analytic philosophy and phenomenology, reframing the question of personal identity in terms of the lived immediacy of self-presence rather than internal self-representation.

Alfredo Tomasetta reopens the classical Indian debate between Buddhist and Nyāya philosophers on the existence of the self, focusing on the multimodality argument. According to Nyāya thinkers, the very possibility of multimodal perception, where data from distinct sensory modalities (e.g., touch and sight) combine into a single experience, requires a unifying self-capable of synthesizing disparate perceptual inputs. The author examines Monima Chadha’s recent attempt, in *Selfless Minds* (2023), to defend Vasubandhu’s Buddhist no-self position against this challenge. Chadha claims that multimodal experiences can occur without invoking a substantial self, since sensory data may combine autonomously. Tomasetta argues that this defense fails on two counts: first, it contradicts Vasubandhu’s own ontology, which embraces mereological nihilism and momentariness—denying any composite entities like multimodal perceptions; second, it results in an unstable position, oscillating between accepting mental wholes (MMPs) and denying personal unity. Through a detailed analysis of Vasubandhu’s metaphysics and the logical implications of Chadha’s reply, Tomasetta shows

that the Buddhist no-self view cannot coherently admit multimodality without reintroducing a minimal notion of self.

Luca Zanetti invites a radical rethinking of the very relationship between self and experience. He challenges the common assumption that we are both subjects and bearers of our experiences, emphasizing a crucial distinction between the two. To be the subject of experience, Zanetti argues, is a phenomenological claim about how experience presents itself. By contrast, to be the bearer or owner of experience is a metaphysical claim concerning the relationship between self and experience. Therefore, Zanetti argues that while we undeniably appear as subjects of experience, this does not entail that we are also its bearers. If experience itself constitutes the arena in which the self manifests, then the self occupies no privileged position in it; rather, it is, in a sense, internal to experience. Experience, in this view, “owns” the self, challenging a deeply ingrained assumption in both phenomenology and the philosophy of mind.

Federico Zilio investigates how metaphysical theories of personhood inform ethical attitudes toward patients with disorders of consciousness. After clarifying key notions such as moral status, vegetative state, and metaphysical versus moral personhood, he examines five main theoretical frameworks — personism, animalism, the disjunctive or hybrid view, the constitution view, and ontological personalism — and their respective bioethical implications. Zilio also argues that *ontological personalism* provides a more adequate account for liminal cases, grounding identity in a corporeal entity of rational nature while recognizing profound alterations in psychological manifestation. From a pragmatic neuroethical perspective, Zilio proposes adopting an ontology that attributes intrinsic moral status to patients in vegetative states, thereby ensuring moral protection even amid diagnostic uncertainty.

Feminist philosophy and gender studies offer crucial insights into the social constitution of identity. They demonstrate that gendered categories like “man” or “woman” are social products of cultural and political nature. Yet these categories also carry affective and existential weight: they can be at the same time sources of oppression and belonging, constraints and resources for self-formation. Feminist and intersectional perspectives thus invite us to think of personal identity as a site of struggle and creativity, within a continuous negotiation between self-definition and social determination. They challenge philosophy itself to reflect on its own categories, showing that conceptual work is never neutral but always situated within networks of power. The contributions included under this thematic lens investigate how gender and intersectional identities reshape traditional assumptions about personhood and urge us to think about the effects that language has on marginalized identities.

Esa Díaz-León investigates the epistemological foundations of first-person authority in gender self-identifications, engaging with Talia Bettcher’s (2009) influential defense of the principle of First-Person Authority (FPA) in gender avowals. Building on recent debates about how best to articulate and justify FPA in ways that support trans rights, Díaz-León proposes an account of the epistemic privilege involved in knowing one’s own gender identity. She argues that such self-knowledge partly stems from our introspective access to the conscious manifestations of our dispositional mental states, such as beliefs and desires. By emphasizing the intimate connection between dispositions and their manifestations, Díaz-León shows how this framework can explain why first-person gender avowals carry a distinctive epistemic authority—one grounded in the very nature of self-knowledge and the phenomenology of mental life.

Martina Giovine examines the psychological and ethical implications of misgendering, understood as a form of microaggression that undermines the gender identity of trans*

3. Gender, Intersectionality, and the Reconstruction of Identity

individuals. Drawing on psychological, medical, and philosophical literature, Giovine explores how structural injustices and social gender norms contribute to the vulnerability of trans* people and affect their identity formation. Against Dembroff and Wodak (2018), who advocate for a radical duty to eliminate gender-specific pronouns as a strategy to address misgendering, Giovine argues instead that gendered language can be essential in affirming personal identity. Her analysis highlights the need for context-sensitive strategies to prevent misgendering and promote inclusive linguistic practices, demonstrating how attention to language can play a pivotal role in supporting selfhood and social recognition.

4. Art, Aesthetic Experience, and the Performance of Selfhood

Finally, art offers a privileged field for exploring personal identity, both as a form of expression, transformation and even resistance. Artistic creation and reception provide a concrete laboratory in which the self is articulated, questioned, and reshaped through gesture, form, and sensibility. The aesthetic dimension discloses aspects of subjectivity that elude abstract theorization, making visible the dynamic interplay between embodiment, imagination, and the social world. In this sense, art not only reflects philosophical inquiry but also enacts it: every artistic act becomes an experiment in selfhood, a testing ground for new ontological and relational possibilities. Through performances, installations, and multimedia practices, artists explore the boundaries between ontological necessity and creative possibility, between personal and collective identity, between authenticity and representation, between human and artificial.

Chiara Cappelletto investigates how the equation of personhood with brain activity—the idea that to “be” means to “have a brain”—has been propagated across visual and performance art, cognitive science, and neuroscience. She argues that brain scans in particular, functioning as “inner portraits”, have legitimized a reductive view of the self that neglects the body’s entanglement with environment and technology. Analyzing works by artists including Abdoulaye Konaté, Jan Fabre, Pierre Huyghe, and Refik Anadol, Cappelletto challenges neuroimaging’s claims to transparency through the lens of visibilization—the process of making visible what resists visualization—and advocates for understanding human subjectivity as situated within intersecting material, epistemic, and narrative networks.

Lisa Sanguinetti explores how contemporary artistic practices address questions of identity from decolonial and intersectional perspectives. She examines the ways in which artists from historically marginalized communities use art as a medium of resistance, self-assertion, and identity reappropriation. Through the case study of the 60th Venice Biennale, Sanguinetti highlights how diverse artistic experiences engage in processes of identity reclamation, seeking to dismantle stereotypes perpetuated by dominant cultures. Her analysis shows that, for many artists, aesthetic practice becomes both a space of political struggle and a means of reconstructing subjectivity beyond imposed representational frameworks.

Diletta Caimmi offers a historical and philosophical investigation of collective artistic practices and their impact on the conception of identity in contemporary art. Tracing the evolution of group experiments from the technological avant-gardes of the 1960s to the politically engaged collectives of the 1970s, the acronym-based collaborations of the 1980s, and the networked forms of the 1990s, she examines how these shared modes of creation have contributed to deconstructing the romantic myth of the solitary author. Caimmi argues that such collaborative processes give rise to new models of subjectivation that transcend individual boundaries and reflect the complex interrelations among technology, politics, and social interaction in today’s artistic landscape.

5. Conclusion

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue converge on an integrative understanding of personal identity as a multidimensional phenomenon: at once

phenomenological and metaphysical, ethical and political, social and aesthetic. Each domain illuminates aspects that the others cannot exhaust. Such integration suggests that the complexity of personal identity demands a plural methodology, within an ongoing dialogue between traditions and disciplines. The philosophical challenge is to articulate this plurality. Moreover, in confronting these questions, the authors gathered here invite us to rethink not only what personal identity is, but why it matters. Exploring personal identity means engaging in a reflection that goes far beyond mere existential concern or theoretical ambition. It means reflecting more broadly on the meaning and value of human life within our societies, in relation to the challenges of technological progress, our professional commitments, our networks of relationships, our responsibilities, and our irrepressible need to express our personal *haecceitas* to its full potential.

SECTION

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SECTION 1

RETHINKING PERSONHOOD: FROM SUBSTANCE TO RELATION

Edoardo Fugali

Embodied first-person perspective

Sofia Livi

Breathing postures

Stavros Panayiotou

A Levinasian critique of criterialism about persons