

HOLDING AND LETTING GO

The Social Practice of Personal Identities



HILDE LINDEMANN

What Child Is This?

The Practice of Personhood

Supported by love, any tissue-paper identity may stand like stone.

—Janet Frame

It is a Sunday afternoon in late summer, shortly after my sixth birthday. Downstairs, my mother is entertaining a visitor; the sound of their voices drifts up through the open window. I am alone in the room I share with my brother and sister, and the paper dolls I've been playing with aren't fun anymore. I chew on the end of my long dark braid, forgetting that my mama told me not to. I'm tired of my book, and I don't feel like coloring. I have run out of things to do.

I walk quietly down the hallway and enter my mama and papa's bedroom, a dim and ordered space where the shades have been drawn against the heat. The crib stands at the foot of the bed. Through the wooden bars, I see that Carla's eyes are open, so I speak to her. She stares at me solemnly, and I think that if she could, she would reach for me. The curls feathering her head are damp with sweat and her little undershirt is rumpled, so I carefully lower the rail and slide my arm under her back, lifting her off the mattress.

Holding her horizontal, I slowly carry her from the room, turning sideways as I take her through the door. When we reach the staircase at the end of the hall, I grope with my foot for the step. I keep my eyes on her face, and she returns the gaze, seemingly intent on what I murmur to her as we make our descent. Here is where the stairs turn, so we have to be extra careful. We'll stay close to the wall, and my foot will tell me where the next step is. You're not so heavy, are you, my baby? You want your mama, don't you. . . . It's pretty dark in here, but we'll be in the kitchen soon. Another step, and then another.

My sandal touches the linoleum at the foot of the stairs. The murmur of voices is louder now, punctuated by my mother's laughter. Again I turn sideways to maneuver us through the doors, and we pass through the empty kitchen and my mama's pretty dining room, where the chocolate brown walls are covered with roses. As we appear in the archway to the living room, my mother sees us and stiffens, breaking off in mid-sentence, coffee cup lowered halfway to the saucer. Then she sets the cup down, forcing her round comfortable face to soften into a smile. "Oh, was Carla awake? Aren't you a good big sister to bring her downstairs. Now come to me slowly. Hold on tight. Be very careful—that's right." As soon as I am in range, she scoops the baby out of my arms and cradles her protectively. She smiles still, but I know I have done something wrong.

In the 1950s, not much could be done about hydrocephaly, a neural tube disorder in which spinal fluid builds up in the brain, exerting pressure that interferes with cerebral function. The intracranial pressure caused by Carla's hydrocephaly was so severe that she couldn't lift her head, turn over, sit up, speak, or grasp objects. I don't remember that she ever smiled. She lacked the ability to swallow and had

to be fed through a nasogastric tube that my mother learned how to manipulate at home. Carla's appearance could deceive a casual observer into thinking she was much like any other baby, though a closer look revealed that her head was somewhat larger than normal. She had the translucent complexion that so often accompanies red hair and a remarkably fine pair of blue eyes. I believed she was beautiful, and a look at the snapshots that have survived gives me no reason to change my opinion. Her physicians predicted that she would live for many years, warning that once she grew past infancy, it would be too difficult for my mother to care for her and she would need to be institutionalized. It never came to that. When she was eighteen months old, the part of the brain that regulated her body temperature succumbed to the pressure and ceased to function. In May 1954, two months before my seventh birthday, Carla died of a high fever.

With Carla firmly in mind, I begin my examination of how personal identities function by exploring a one-sided practice that often takes place in families and other structures of intimacy where there is a responsibility to care for someone who is seriously ill or disabled. It is the practice of holding the individual in personhood by constructing or maintaining an identity for her when she cannot, or can no longer, do it for herself. I then want to press four questions. First, how can we make sense of the notion of conferring a personal identity on someone who can contribute nothing to her own personhood? Second, if human beings can be brought into or held in being by how they are treated, then why can't we unilaterally call into personhood just any valued entity? Third, what do we owe to those we hold in personhood? And fourth, must we hold in personhood any being who can be so held?

THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by “maintaining a personal identity.” Marya Schechtman has usefully distinguished between two senses of identity. The first has to do with the question of whether a person at one point in time is still the same as the person at an earlier point in time. Call this the reidentification question. The second has to do with how the person sees herself and who other people understand her to be. In this sense of personal identity, the question isn’t “Am I still the same person?” but “Who am I?” Call this the characterization question (Schechtman 1996).

I have argued elsewhere (Nelson 2001) that personal identities in the sense of the characterization question are narratively constituted. They consist of tissues of stories and fragments of stories, generated from both first- and third-person perspectives, that cluster around what we take to be our own or others’ most important acts, experiences, characteristics, roles, relationships, and commitments: these stories display the various facets of who the person is. They are, that is to say, narrative understandings formed out of the interaction between one’s self-concept and others’ sense of us. And because stories depict time passing, the narratives that constitute identities can reflect the respects in which we change, as well as how we remain the same.¹

Many of the narrative understandings forming a part of a personal identity draw on stock plots and character types that are familiar to us all. At some point in your life, perhaps, you might have

1. For a recent theory of the narrative nature of identities that responds to criticisms in the philosophical literature but does not take their social construction and maintenance into account, see Davenport 2012.

understood your relationship with a lover by configuring it according to the stock boy-meets-girl script that structures everything from “Cinderella” to Valentine’s Day; the story then becomes a piece of your identity-constituting autobiography. A friend betrays you, and you identify him in biblical terms: he is a Judas. A white police officer sees a black teenager driving his mother’s BMW and pigeon-holes him as a drug dealer or a car thief, drawing on the representations of African American youths that saturate the media. Socially shared narratives like these contribute to the identities of groups as well as individuals, and members of the group draw a part of their identity from how the group identity is narratively constructed.²

Other parts of the narrative tissue that constitute a personal identity consist of the localized, particular stories that pick an individual out as distinct from others in the groups to which she belongs: these are the stories that distinguish Carla from the other members of her family or from the class of badly damaged babies in general. They are the stories of Carla’s birth and her repeated hospitalizations, of the day my sister bathed her under close maternal supervision, of the time when my father took her outside to show her our tree fort, and of the afternoon I just recounted, when I carried her down the stairs.

Personal identities function as counters in our social transactions, in that they convey understandings of what those who bear them are expected to do. If an answer to “Who are you?” is “the bartender,” for example, I expect you to know how to mix a martini;

2. According to Anthony Appiah, a collective identity consists of a label picking out a group, the internalization of the label as a part of the identity of at least some individual group members, and the existence of patterns of behavior toward those to whom the label applies (Appiah 2007, 66–69). While I agree with Appiah that the consensus on how to identify those bearing the label is organized around narratives, I do not think the internalization of the label is a necessary part of the identity; others will treat you as a member of the group whether you see yourself as a member or not.

if the answer is “a practicing Muslim,” I don’t. Moreover, identities also convey understandings of how those who bear them may be treated. If you’re my three-year-old son, I can remind you to use the toilet, but if you’re my boss, I’d better not. Personal identities thus make intelligible not only how other people are supposed to act, but how *we* are supposed to act with respect to them.

From a first-person perspective, personal identities function in much the same way. I treat myself with contempt or respect depending on who I think I am, and out of that narratively constructed sense of myself, I also establish certain expectations for how I ought to behave in the future. But the fit between my identity and my agency goes in both directions: if it’s true that I act out of the tissue of stories that constitute my sense of who I am, it’s just as true that I express who I am by how I act. In fact, my actions are important criteria for assessing the accuracy of my self-conception. If, for instance, I see myself as a good driver but I’ve received four traffic citations in the last six months, others have reason to doubt, in this respect, at any rate, that my identity-constituting stories are credible ones.

As the good driver example reveals, personal identities may be sites of contestation. This is particularly true for members of minority groups who have been persistently misidentified by those in the dominant culture. So, for example, the black teenager driving his mother’s BMW doesn’t at all view himself the way the white cop does. In his case, the difference of opinion over who he is might, with difficulty, be resolved as soon as his mother comes down to the station house to set the officer straight. In other cases, recognition of a self-understanding may be impossible to come by because the person lacks the social standing that permits her own story about who she is to be taken up by others (Fricker 2009).

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Identity formation begins in infancy and often even earlier, as family members prepare for the birth by folding their newest addition into the ongoing narrative of the life they live in common (I'll have much more to say about this in the next chapter). In the case of a normal, healthy child, the process continues through the child's interaction with the other members of the family. The family therapist Salvador Minuchin puts it this way:

Human experience of identity has two elements: a sense of belonging and a sense of being separate. The laboratory in which these ingredients are mixed and dispensed is the family, the matrix of identity.

In the early process of socialization, families mold and program the child's behavior and sense of identity. The sense of belonging comes with an accommodation on the child's part to the family groups and with his assumption of transactional patterns in the family structure that are consistent throughout different life events. Tommy Wagner is a Wagner, and throughout his life he will be the son of Emily and Mark. . . .

The sense of separateness and individuation occurs through participation in different family subsystems in different family contexts, as well as through participation in extrafamilial groups. As the child and the family grow together, the accommodation of the family to the child's needs delimits areas of autonomy that he experiences as separateness. A psychological and transactional territory is carved out for that particular child. Being Tom is different from being a Wagner. (Minuchin 1974, 47-48)

Tommy *becomes* who he is through a mutual process of accommodating himself to his family and being accommodated by it—and though Minuchin doesn't say much about this, the process profoundly affects the identities of the other family members as well. Moreover, by interacting with his family, Tommy also *expresses* who he is. Because Tommy is a child, he expresses himself clumsily, of course. But his actions do reveal some things about him. They exhibit his likes and dislikes, who and what he cares about, whether he is fearful or foolhardy, affectionate or reserved. It's the stories that he and his family construct around his acts, and around the other things about Tommy that matter most to them, that form Tommy's identity. Because Tommy can speak and act, he collaborates in the construction of his identity. He contributes first-person stories to the narrative tissue that represents who he is.

THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF CARLA'S IDENTITY

Now let's return to Carla. It's doubtful that she was capable of forming a self-conception, and even if she did have some sense of who she was, she certainly lacked the ability to express it. The narrative tissue that constituted her personal identity therefore contained no stories from her own, first-person perspective. It was constructed entirely from the third-person point of view. We who were her family, along with friends, neighbors, and the many health care professionals she encountered in her short life, gave her all the identity she had.

Could we have misidentified her? Of course we could. Though Carla couldn't, by word or deed, contest our narratives of who she was, there were a number of other constraints on the credibility

of our stories. For one thing, there was the limit imposed by her disability. If my father had, for instance, constructed out of equal parts of hope and grief a story about Carla's being just a bit slower to develop than we older children were, the story would not have been a credible contribution to her identity. Had my four-year-old brother, acting out of his narrative understanding of her, demanded that she play trains with him, his narratives would have had to be judged defective as well. Nor was her disability the only constraint on the accuracy of our stories. Her neurologist couldn't credibly set her within the identity-constituting narratives of the family down the street. I couldn't credibly represent her as my older sister. No personal identity is infinitely malleable; all are bound by facts of one kind or another.

If, however, there are a number of ways for the stories that constitute an identity to go wrong, there are also a number of ways for them to go right. On that Sunday afternoon when I brought Carla down the stairs, my mother's complicated reaction was both an acknowledgment of my good intentions and an indication that she saw Carla primarily as a terribly sick little baby. Her hydrocephaly seems to have been the thing about Carla that mattered most to my mother, and indeed she wove many of her stories of who Carla was around that fact. I, on the other hand, seem to have been too young to appreciate the seriousness of her condition, so while it entered into my narrative conception of her, I saw her primarily as a playmate. I wasn't then a competent judge of how well my playmate story identified her, but as I remember that incident now, I still think the narrative was a credible contribution to Carla's identity.

Each of us in the family, I daresay, saw Carla in a slightly different light. Acting on our various conceptions of who she was, we made a place for her among us, treating her according to how we saw her, and in so treating her, making her into even more of the person we

saw. Because I played with her, she was my playmate. Because my mother cared for her at home, she was a member of the household. There were five of us engaged in the narrative work of forming and preserving Carla's identity, and while many of the stories were ones we shared in common, we all added individual bits and pieces of our own. The more we did this, the richer her identity became. All of us, singly and severally, were contributing to what it meant to be Carla. To the extent that our narratives reflected faithfully who she was within our family, even we children, who were not yet full moral agents, were taking part in the creation and maintenance of something morally valuable. We were holding her in personhood.

WAS CARLA A PERSON?

The language of "persons" and "personhood" is perhaps employed more often by philosophers than by less peculiarly educated people. In ordinary conversation, we typically talk, not of persons, but of consumers, stepmothers, pedestrians, and literary critics. Implicit in these terms, however, and common to them all, is the complicated set of reactions and attitudes that both express and sustain what is fundamentally a special moral relationship. The thought that this toddler or that passenger is a person very likely doesn't cross our minds, but assumptions about how they are to be regarded and what we may or must not do to them lie at the heart of our conception of the entities with whom we share our way of being in the world.

My parents, siblings, and I took up these assumptions and attitudes toward Carla, and if you'd asked us whether she was a person, we would have pitied you for being a philosopher and said, "Of course." But it's here that we have to ask the question of how it make sense to construct a personal identity for someone who can

contribute nothing to her own personhood. Can we truthfully say that Carla had any personhood for us to acknowledge? Isn't "person" simply an honorific that the rest of us bestowed on her—a kind of "as if" that tugs at the heartstrings but is nonetheless a philosophical confusion (Engelhardt 1975)? Surely, we might object, she wasn't really a person. She didn't, after all, measure up to the ordinary criteria for personhood that have been advanced in the philosophical literature.

She wasn't capable of rational reflection, as required by Immanuel Kant's, John Rawls's, Tamar Shapiro's, and Christine Korsgaard's theories (Kant 1998, Rawls 1971, Shapiro 1999, Korsgaard 2009). She probably wasn't self-aware, which is Michael Tooley's criterion (Tooley 1983). It wasn't clear to what extent we could ascribe intentional predicates to her, as P. F. Strawson would have us do (1959). She wasn't able to treat others as persons, as Rawls (again) and Thomas Nagel specify (Rawls 1971, Nagel 1972). She couldn't communicate with us verbally, as Daniel Dennett says she must (Dennett 1976). She wasn't capable of forming second-order desires, as Harry Frankfurt requires (1988a). She couldn't, as Schechtman would have it, organize her experiences, acts, or relationships into an autobiographical narrative (Schechtman 1996). Notice how all these criteria are based on the individual's own capacities and capabilities—and how, in many cases, they're identical to the criteria for moral agency. By all these measures, Carla flat-out flunked the personhood test.

About all she had going for her was that we treated her in certain ways, and according to Amélie Rorty (1962), Hilary Putnam (1964), Wilfrid Sellars (1966), Antony Flew (1968), Cora Diamond (1991a), and Carl Elliott (2001), our treating her in these ways is somehow and to some extent what makes her a person. But how can this be? Under what circumstances does third-person

identity construction confer actual rather than merely honorific personhood?

THE ATTITUDE TOWARD A SOUL

Elliott's account of persons seems to suggest an answer. He begins with Wittgenstein's remark in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul" (Wittgenstein 2001, 152). Following Wittgenstein, Elliott argues that to treat someone as a person does not involve knowing that "this is a person," but rather consists in taking up a certain attitude or stance toward her. Implicit in this stance is the recognition that the person has certain rights, is properly the object of various moral duties, and so on, and to that extent, we can speak of the attitude toward a soul as a moral attitude. But it's also more than that. It includes taking for granted that persons wear clothes and are given names rather than numbers, and that they are to be referred to as "who" instead of "what." The stance we take toward persons is one we learn, and we learn it so early and so thoroughly that it becomes second nature. Elliott writes, "Our attitudes toward other beings are built into the language that we use to describe them, and the language is embedded in a way of behaving toward them—what Wittgenstein calls a 'practical method.' This practical method is not something that is best described as deliberative action, but something that is reactive and habitual" (Elliott 2001, 97). How we think about and behave toward things of a certain type is tied to the attitude we are taught to take toward such things, and this in turn is tied to the form of life we inhabit.

The form of life is important, Elliott contends, because the biological characteristics to which the concept of personhood is

connected (such as the capacity for speech) become significant when cultures make something of them, and different cultures understand these characteristics differently. Elliott writes, “It would not surprise me, for example, to hear an anthropologist speak about one culture that revered...damaged children and another culture that simply discarded them, and that each attitude was tied in complex and subtle ways to the culture’s religion, structures of kinship, beliefs about health and illness, and so on” (Elliott 2001, 98–99). Treating someone as a person involves a range of attitudes, and these differ somewhat from one culture to the next.

Because Elliott’s account consists of a description of linguistic practices connected to reaction and habit within a given form of life, it answers the question of how my family’s response to Carla makes sense with an empirical consideration: “This is simply what we do.” The difficulty with this answer, however, is that it doesn’t resolve the question of whether we ought to do it *here*, in this puzzling instance. What we wanted to know was how we should proceed in the outlier cases, where there doesn’t seem to be any one settled thing we do. So we need to find another way of making sense of the idea that someone could be held in personhood entirely by others’ actions. To do that, we might take a somewhat closer look at what Wittgenstein himself has to say about souls.

EMBODIED PERSONS

In the same section of the *Philosophical Investigations* but farther down the page, Wittgenstein says that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul” (Wittgenstein 2001, 152). All of the section containing this remark deals with how we recognize and respond

to people's so-called psychological or mental states—what we tend to think of as people's inner lives. It's people's bodies that express whether they are excited, puzzled, or interested; whether they are amused, fearful, or determined. So, in reading their bodies—their postures, gestures, and expressions—we are simultaneously reading what's "in" their minds. And it's our ability to read human bodies in this way that allows us to see human beings as personalities rather than as furniture, plants, or pets (Walker 1998, 181).

In his explanation of *how* we read bodies, Elliott rightly emphasizes Wittgenstein's insistence that this is something we have had to learn. As Margaret Urban Walker puts it, "We have to grasp the code of recognition (what Wittgenstein called the 'method of projection' or the 'application' of a kind of picture) that connects certain displays with certain meanings, and so makes a picture show what it does" (Walker 1998, 182). But the point here isn't only that this kind of recognition and response requires training—it's that there is something here to be recognized. There is something to get right or wrong, something we can see or misperceive, something to which we can respond well or badly. Your grimace might be a manifestation of chagrin (an expression of personality) that I mistake for an involuntary reflex (an expression of indigestion, perhaps). Or I might register your smile as a smile but fail to recognize that it's an angry smile. Most of us, though, manage fairly successfully most of the time to read other people's psychological or emotional states from the comportment, behavior, or expression of their bodies.

Frequently, this involves attending to a number of bodily movements in a combination that's intelligible only in certain settings and sequences. Then it's the very specificity of the configuration-in-context that lets us zero in on the person's subjectivity, in much the same way as the detail in a map leads us to

the particular house we are trying to find. If we share enough of the context and have learned how to look, we can usually tell when someone is feeling triumphant, or gets the joke, or resents the intrusion.

What's there to be recognized (or misunderstood) is the changing procession of sensations, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, wishes, misgivings, and other mental states that cross a human consciousness. The capacity to generate selected items in this procession has been taken by some philosophers to be either necessary or sufficient for personhood, but I want to suggest instead that the psychological states themselves are the stuff around which personhood coalesces. If we take seriously, as I believe we must, that these states are socially mediated and that persons, too, are essentially social, then, rather than tying personhood solely to capabilities and competencies residing within the individual, we have to see it as largely also an interpersonal achievement.

Pushing Wittgenstein's "picture" remark one step further, let me propose that our psychological states, their bodily representations, others' uptake of these representations, and the treatment based on that uptake all play a part in the formation and maintenance of personhood. Put more precisely, my claim is that personhood just *is* the bodily expression of the feelings, thoughts, desires, and intentions that constitute a human personality, as recognized by others, who then respond in certain ways to what they see. *Recognition* includes establishing a personal identity by engaging in the narrative activity that constitutes our sense of who the person is. *Response* includes the attitudes and actions we take toward the person—what we do to or for the person and what we expect from the person—on the basis of that identity-constituting, narrative activity. The bodily depiction of the succession of mental states and its uptake by others in the form of recognition and response make up what can be called the

social practice of personhood, the practice on which all other social practices rest.

The tissue of stories that constitute our identities are representations of persons—that is, they portray the individuals who participate in the practice of personhood. But what, exactly, is they portray? Personhood, on my Wittgensteinian account, is a matter of expression and recognition, of playing roles in a kind of human drama. But in a drama there is a distinction between the character an actor is playing and the actor who plays that character. If identities are analogous to characters, what's the analogue to the actor who brings the character to life on stage? I take it that the analogue is the self, where a self is understood as the locus of idiosyncratic causation, sensation, and experience.³ This self is socially shaped by the very practices in which it participates, and because selves change over time, the stories that once represented them—if they are to represent them accurately—must fall out of the narrative tissue, to be replaced by newer stories that capture what is important about the self as it is now.

On a Wittgensteinian analysis it makes no sense, in the standard case, to say that we know someone is a person (“I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul”). Matters are different in the outlier cases. It *does* make sense to ask of someone in a persistent vegetative state, or an anencephalic baby, or someone suffering from the later stages of Alzheimer's disease, whether they are persons. The reason it makes sense is that the further away we move from the paradigm case, the more difficult it is to apply the concept. What complicates the matter further is that the narrative process of identity constitution usually begins before the entity becomes a person, often continues after

3. I'm grateful to Naomi Scheman for helping me with this formulation.

the person no longer exists, and sometimes fails altogether because the person for whom the identity is created never does, as it happens, come into being.

The embodied, social account of personhood I'm proposing can help us distinguish among these outlier cases. Carla had experiences and sensations; she could fix her attention; she could be comforted. These mental states were enough, I think, for the family's practice of personhood to get a toehold, even though Carla's own contribution to that practice was severely limited. By the same token, someone who has become progressively more demented may still retain enough cognitive functioning to be held in personhood by her loved ones or by kind and caring professionals. Anencephalics and those in the persistent vegetative state, on the other hand, are incapable of even the minimal psychological activity around which personhood could be formed. Where there are no mental states, there is nothing for the body to express, no picture for others to recognize. In these cases, I am inclined to say that there is no meaningful possibility of bringing into existence, or continuing to maintain, the individual's personhood. The attempt to hold the individual in personhood misfires; the concept of "person" has been misapplied.

On the view I am proposing, fetuses aren't persons either, but for a different reason. Although late-term fetuses, at any rate, typically seem to be capable of sensing, fearing, and wanting, the fact that they are hidden from view makes it impossible for others to engage in the recognition and response that would otherwise bring them into personhood. The one exception is the pregnant woman herself, who can play out the requisite practices of personhood once she feels the fetus move. But her ability to do this is severely circumscribed by the limited pictorial repertoire available to the fetus: a sharp dig of an elbow, a series of kicks, the fluttering sensation

produced by movements of the hands or feet—all of which might mean anything, or nothing.

Nevertheless, in a pregnancy, the narrative work of constructing a personal identity often does make sense, even though the work might begin many months before the fetus is brought to term. It makes sense in the cases where the pregnancy is wanted, because then there is an expectation that the fetus will become a born child, and identity construction is a way of anticipating the child's personhood. In other cases, the woman carrying the fetus might refrain from weaving narratives of personal identity around the fetus, because she doesn't want the fetus to become her child. In still other cases, the woman begins the process of identity construction and then either decides she must abort, miscarries, learns that the baby is anencephalic, or undergoes a stillbirth, any of which might occasion the same grief and anguish as the loss of a child. And sometimes it's another member of the family entirely, or a friend, who undertakes the imaginative labor of conferring an anticipatory personal identity on the fetus. Whether the identity is actually the identity of a person depends on the outcome of the pregnancy.

The fetal sonograms that have become such a regular part of a middle-class pregnancy contribute greatly to this process of anticipatory identity construction precisely because they offer an image of the body to which others can respond. To be sure, it often takes enormous feats of the imagination to make out the fetus's feet, head, or hands. Despite this, doting relatives have become amazingly adept at configuring the blurred shapes to their own satisfaction. As the technology for viewing fetuses in utero becomes more sophisticated, it may well expand the application of the concept of personhood so that it covers fetuses in ever earlier stages of development—particularly as prenatal

care involving routine use of fetal imagery becomes universally available.

THE QUESTION OF LIMITS

If my account of personhood is roughly right, then we have to raise a further question. The way we treated our cat was very much like the way we treated Carla. We considered him a member of the household, we fed him and met his other physical needs, we played with him, we had a narrative understanding of who he was, and when he was sick, we took him to the vet's. Moreover, the cat's capacities and capabilities outstripped Carla's by a long chalk. He could purr when we petted him, demand to be fed or go out, express emotions such as fear or frustration, dart as if demon-possessed through all the rooms in the house. If Carla, capable of nothing more than looking at us, could be brought into personhood by how we treated her, then why couldn't the cat?

As Wittgenstein famously remarks about one species of cat, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (Wittgenstein 2001, 190). The reason we couldn't understand him is that lions inhabit an alien form of life, foreign not only in its practices and customs but also in its embodiment. What a lion sees, smells, and hears; how it keeps its balance; the amount of sleep and freedom of movement it requires; the shape of its mouth and teeth—all these physical characteristics contribute to a way of being in the world that we humans can only begin to comprehend. The obstacle to our comprehension isn't just that lions are wild—it's that they're not human. Even domesticated cats, who live in our houses with us and adapt themselves to our comings and goings, can't be said to share in our form of life. The way of being that is supported by their embodiment is

simply too far removed from ours for us to draw cats into our human practices of personhood. Cora Diamond has something like this in mind when she writes:

We, who share this striking thing—having a human life to lead—may make in imagination something of what it is to have a human life to lead; and this imaginative response we may see (and judge and learn from) in the doings and words and customs of those who share *having a human life to lead*. That perception may belong to the understanding we want of those words or actions or customs. (The actions in which the sense of human life is perceivable include but are by no means limited to actions affecting other living human beings.) (Diamond 1991b, 43–44)

There is something that it is like to share in the distinctively human condition, for all the many great differences among human beings. I don't mean simply that human beings occupy what Wilfred Sellars called "the logical space of reasons" (Sellars 1956, 298–99)—obviously, Carla did no such thing, nor do any of us on first entering that condition. But Carla had a human life to lead, not only because of her human embodiment but also because she was born into the nexus of human relationships that made her one of us. She was my sister, my mother's baby, my Oma's grandchild, my father's daughter, and in that way she was ours as no cat or other kind of animal could ever be.⁴

There are many ways of valuing the nonhuman animals with whom we are in relationship: we can love them, name them, play with them, share living space with them, and teach them. And we certainly have moral responsibilities toward them, many of which

4. Thanks to Rita Charon for helping me to get clear on this question.

are the same as our responsibilities to persons. But we can't occupy their lifeworld, nor can we fully bring them into ours.

Humans, it seems, can confer personhood only on other humans. But couldn't Martians or dolphins or angels also participate in something like the practices of personhood that, among humans, take the form of displays *by*, and responses to, the human body? We can certainly imagine such a possibility, though perhaps only with respect to corporeal beings. (Anyone who has ever read all of *Paradise Lost* will remember the crashingly bad verse Milton produced when he tried to depict angels' bodiless digestive systems. Attempts to imagine their interpersonal relations can, I suspect, only go downhill from there.) The trouble with what we can imagine is that it's so easy to import all sorts of questionable assumptions into our imaginings. Just as we imagine that we could understand a talking lion, so, too, we imagine that incorporeal persons could have something we are familiar with because we recognize it in human beings, but which is completely unrelated to the criteria *by* which we recognize it in human beings.

Other corporeal beings, however, do engage in expressive and responsive behaviors bearing at least some similarity to those that sustain human practices of personhood. Elephants, for example, seem to engage in the distinctive patterns of recognition and response reserved for members of their kind (Bates et al., 2008), and presumably any species of animal that lives in packs, herds, schools, or flocks employs such behaviors. In this book, however, I confine myself to an examination of human personhood and leave it to others to determine how like or unlike it is to what other animals do.

None of my remarks are intended to supply sufficient conditions for personhood. They are meant, rather, to describe a social practice. Like other social practices, this one is normatively binding—I can't just decide that Carla is a table, and I can't just declare that

personhood extends to cats—but again like other social practices, it contains critical resources for its own evaluation and revision. We can reflect on what our practice leaves out, argue about whether it includes too much, give reasons for changing certain aspects of the practice or revising our understandings of what it entails. And because personhood is as much a moral as a social concept, we can test, refine, and question our beliefs about what is owed to those who participate in the practice.

HOLDING AND LETTING GO

The account of personhood I am proposing, then, is of a social practice involving four components: a procession of mental states, expression of these states by a human body, recognition of what is expressed, and response on the basis of that recognition. The account allows for the possibility that a personal identity could be constituted from a purely third-person perspective, while at the same time setting reasonable limits on the sorts of entities that can be held in personhood by these means. But more needs to be said about why it matters whether Carla was a person. Given her almost total lack of agency and the enormous burden of care this imposed on my parents, did she really need to be held in personhood? Would it have been morally permissible just to let her go?

Here we need to make some distinctions. There are differences between (1) holding or letting go of someone's personhood, (2) holding or letting go of someone's life, and (3) holding or letting go of some part of a person's identity. I'll have much more to say later on about the morality of each of these, but for now, let me lay out some theoretical tools I'll be using throughout this book and put them to work on a preliminary answer to what we owed—and didn't owe—Carla.

Holding or Letting Go of Someone's Personhood

To think carefully about whether there's a duty to hold human individuals in personhood, we might want to distinguish among duties that are impersonally authoritative and those that are personally authoritative. In the most general terms, personhood gives us our selves: we can't be who we are without the other persons who initially hold us and then maintain us in personhood. Because participation in personhood opens us to the riches of a distinctively human life, I am inclined to say that the duty to value any individual who could be a person in the special way reserved for persons is impersonally authoritative, binding on all of us, no matter who we are. Carla's personhood required, for example, that anyone, whether stranger or family member, see her as what Eva Kittay calls "some mother's child" (Kittay 1998, 23), rather than as merely a thing to be cared for, just as it would have prohibited anyone, had the technology then been available, from killing her for the sole purpose of harvesting her organs for others' use.

We can think of requirements and prohibitions of this sort as falling under the general heading of an impersonally authoritative obligation to treat persons in a manner consonant with their value. Elliott tells of his experience as a third-year medical student, following an intern on ward rounds at the county hospital in Charleston, South Carolina. They passed through the room of an elderly woman "who was," says Elliott, "if not permanently vegetative, very close to it." The intern's instructions to Elliott, he recalls, were roughly this: "She's a plant; you're the gardener; your job is to make sure she is watered" (Elliott 2001, 95). There are a number of reasons that health care practitioners say things like that about their patients—for one thing, black humor can be a way of reducing other people's misery to manageable proportions. All the same, this is no way to

talk about a person. It might not *harm* a person who is barely conscious to be treated like a plant, but arguably it *wrongs* her, because it pushes her outside the human community. To be sure, even those who can no longer take even a minimally active part in the practice of personhood, such as the dead or those in the persistent vegetative state, ought not to be subjected to indignities. But that is so primarily because of the intimate causal connection between what they are now and the persons they once were or might have been. The immense moral value of lives like yours and mine spills over, as it were, in forward, backward, and sideways directions on humans who can't, or can no longer, be fully held in personhood (Sumner 1981).⁵

Other responsibilities to persons are role-related, but these, too, are impersonally authoritative. Any father, for example, no matter who he is, has a defeasible responsibility to protect, nurture, and love his child. At this level of obligation, Carla's personhood required that her father hold her in her identity as his daughter, that he care for her more deeply than he cared about the neighbors' children, and that he go to considerable lengths, if need be, to meet her physical and medical needs. It required him to play a primary role in keeping her safe from others' negligence or abuse. It also required him to foster such emotional and familial ties as could be forged between her and her siblings. Moreover, because she was his terribly *impaired* daughter, we would find his love defective if it had not been mingled with pain and sorrow.

Holding or Letting Go of Someone's Life

I've just claimed that the duty to hold in personhood anyone who could be so held is impersonally authoritative. But in the tragic cases

5. A variation on Sumner's argument is Nolan 1988, and James Lindemann Nelson suggested a further variation to me.

where a living human being is in such a bad way that she would be better off dead, the right thing to do might be to let go of her life, or even kill her directly. And once she is dead, she can't be held in personhood. So now we address the question as to when, if ever, it's morally permissible or even obligatory to let go of someone's life. To sort this out, we need a little more theory.

Jonathan Dancy argues that the reasons for acting in a given set of circumstances take on a specific moral "shape." That is, they cluster together in a particular way that adds up to "this is wrong," or "this is good to do," or some such moral judgment (Dancy 1993). A reason that in one configuration might count for doing something could, in another configuration, count against doing it, or count neither for nor against. Being helpful, for example, is usually a good reason to act—but not when someone needs your help to steal a car. Inflicting pain is usually bad—but not when your patient needs the operation. And because considerations carry their moral import only holistically, there are no laws that govern how these reasons behave. Instead, Dancy contends, understanding the morality of an action is a matter of skill or wisdom in discerning the overall "shape" of the situation—seeing how the moral considerations add up in the given case.

Moral particularism is widely regarded as controversial. The biggest worry has to do with the claimed absence of lawlike structures to govern how moral reasons behave. Without universal principles, after all, we seem to be left with nothing but one-off judgments: it's wrong to cause pain here, good to break a promise there, you are morally bound to look out the window in Knoxville next Thursday. And if there is no structure to moral theory, how could morality ever be learned? For that matter, how could moral matters even be discussed? As Mark Lance and Margaret Little observe, "A discipline—be it ethics or epistemology—empty of any theoretical or law-like

generalizations is a discipline with highly attenuated potential for understanding” (Lance and Little 2004, 437).

There is a second worry as well. Moral particularism’s context dependency can issue in moral judgments that leave the emotions struggling to catch up. If my duty to let my daughter’s life go silences my reasons to care for her, why, instead of the glow of satisfaction that is said to accompany the performance of a duty, do I feel such deep sorrow and grief?⁶ One explanation is that there really are moral principles at work in these cases, and the bad feelings come from the moral pull they continue to exert, even though they have been outweighed by other, more stringent ones. Either that, or my feelings are an irrational hangover from having had the authority of what I now believe to be nonexistent moral principles drummed into me since infancy.

Lance and Little, however, offer what is to my mind a more attractive explanation, one that preserves the contextualist insight of moral particularism but doesn’t discard the theoretical generalizations that are crucial for moral explanation and justification. They point to “a kind of generalization that is both genuinely explanatory *and* ineliminably exception-laden,” because it *privileges* the conditions under which a moral connection holds (Lance and Little 2004, 441). These conditions are privileged, not in the sense that they are the statistically usual ones (they might or might not be), but in the sense that they enjoy explanatory, conceptual, or justificatory priority over nonprivileged conditions. They are privileged when, for example, children are healthy enough to lead decent lives; in that

6. Jonathan Dancy’s example has to do with hitting your assailant to make him let go of your daughter, where reasons of prudence silence ethical considerations of how hard you should hit. He says that “any natural or moral repugnance must be fought down,” but it’s the fact that you can have negative feelings when you’ve done the right thing that interests me here (Dancy 1993, 51–52).

case, the defeasible generalization “parents should care for their children” holds good. If you ought *not* to care for your child, then, it’s precisely because the privileged conditions don’t obtain: perhaps the family’s capacity for care has been overwhelmed by too many demands on it and too few resources, or perhaps the child’s unbearable, untreatable suffering is a definitive reason to stop treatment.

Lance and Little’s “defeasibility holism” offers a plausible account of how moral generalizations can be robustly explanatory even though they are, necessarily, riddled with exceptions. Moreover, their account remains genuinely particularistic, as there is no algorithm or lawlike principle for determining when a condition is privileged. But this need not daunt us. “Barring the creation of an exhaustive exceptionless theory of privilege, navigating the world remains at bottom a matter of skill—including now a skill at understanding and recognizing what is deviant and normal, what paradigmatic and emendational, what conceptually prior or central. We must know our way around possibility space in a far richer sense than has previously been appreciated” (Lance and Little 2004, 453).

Defeasibility holism also accounts for the seemingly wayward feelings that accompany some moral judgments. The regret or anguish attendant on doing what we must when moral reasons have switched their normal valence or been silenced altogether can be explained as a kind of grief over the failure of privileged conditions to obtain. It’s not simply that the conditions *deviate* from the privileged ones; it’s that the actors inhabit a morally *defective* situation. It is a bad-making feature of the circumstances that this child’s death would be better for her than the dreadful suffering she endures. Would that Carla had been spared her hydrocephaly.

If all this is right, we can see why there might not be any one definitive answer to the question of whether we were morally required to hold Carla in her life. It’s not that there is no right answer

in any particular case, but rather that we'd have to know quite a lot more about the specific moral shape of *that* case. The most we can say—and even this may not be quite right—is that when it is morally better to let go of someone who could still be held in her life, something has gone badly wrong with the surrounding conditions: we are in the presence of a terrible tragedy.

Holding or Letting Go of Someone's Identity

Now let's turn to the question of which aspects of Carla's identity, if any, we were bound to hold her in. Because we believed we were obligated to hold her in personhood, the duty to weave identity-constituting stories around the things about Carla that mattered most to us was impersonally authoritative, as those stories were the means by which we held her. Epistemic as well as moral norms required all of us to converge on some of the same stories in the narrative tissue that formed her identity: stories having to do with who her sisters and brother were, for example, or why we lived where we did, or what was making her so ill.

Other stories, however, were discretionary, but they might not have been discretionary for specific people in her life. Here I think we can talk about personally authoritative responsibilities. These are the responsibilities that arise out of what Frankfurt calls volitional necessity: I must behave toward this person in a particular way not only because I can't help it, but because I don't want to help it (Frankfurt 1988b, 87). You, being you, might not be bound in the same way.

At this level of responsibility, my mother had to construct stories about Carla according to her own lights, along the lines of how she understood her relationship to her youngest and most vulnerable child. I, being me, had to do it somewhat differently, making

sense of who Carla was in the terms that my six-year-old self knew best. Although Frankfurt denies that very young children are capable of the second-order volition that produces this kind of necessity (Frankfurt 1988a, 16), developmental psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated that children as young as three are capable of endorsing or repudiating their first-order desires (Gopnik 2009, 59), which makes me think I really did hold Carla in her identity as my playmate out of volitional necessity. In any case, as I look back on it now, I think I held her in a way that was authoritative for me.

Because identities survive people's lives, they extend beyond their personhood. Once her family and the other people who cared for her engaged in the narrative work of constructing her identity, the stories by which we represented her will survive as long as any of us remember her. Indeed, they'll outlive even those of us who knew her personally, as long as they are handed down to those who come after us. Later, we'll revisit the question whether holding the dead in their identities is required of the living, but for now let me just say that holding Carla in a number of aspects of her identity—as my sister, my playmate, a sick little girl, my mama's baby, and so on—continues to be personally authoritative for me. But I do it in the ways I find I must, while others who knew her do it either as they must or as they choose. Just as we all saw her slightly differently when she was among us, so we remember her slightly differently now that she is gone. And the means by which we *express* what we remember can also differ. I, for example, write about her here, whereas my brother and sister have never, to my knowledge, remembered her in writing.

It can sometimes be difficult to know how to “go on,” as Wittgenstein would say—how to follow the rule for the application of a fuzzy concept. When we bioethicists and other philosophers engage in talk of persons, we are apt to conjure up a picture of persons like us: adult human beings who are competent moral agents

and who interact more or less freely with other fully developed moral agents. This is surely a paradigmatic picture, but it doesn't accurately represent all of the different kinds of persons there are. "A main cause of philosophical disease—" remarks Wittgenstein, "an unbalanced diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example" (Wittgenstein 2001, §593). This chapter serves, I hope, to show why we need to extend our conception of persons beyond that comfortable example. The old picture leaves too much out. Among other things, it doesn't allow us to explain what families are doing when they hold a badly impaired child in personhood.

In the week after Carla died, my mother described our loss in a letter to her own mother. "We still seek her around every corner, although with time the sense of emptiness will surely vanish. And we are all the richer because we were permitted to have her these eighteen months, as in that time we learned so much from her about love, compassion, and patience." My mother's way of holding Carla in personhood shines through these words.

What Does It All Mean?

Of those so close beside me, which are you? God bless the Ground!
I shall walk softly there, And learn by going where I have to go.

—Theodore Roethke

Taken together, this book's many stories and examples of holding and letting go become a picture of a practice so natural to human beings that it has gone entirely unnoticed in most accounts of personal identity in the philosophical literature. I think, however, that the picture merits philosophical attention. It adds a dimension to ethics that can both deepen our understanding of morality and help us in making decisions about what we should do. And it reminds us of something many philosophers have found it all too easy to forget: the essentially interpersonal nature of being human.

It's a picture, first and foremost, of a social practice—perhaps the most fundamental social practice. Like all such practices, this one is governed by rules, and it has a point: to allow us to live well in the sphere of special moral consideration reserved for persons. Healthy specimens of our kind are inducted into personhood through the same social interactions by which we acquire our linguistic, rational, and moral agency. It's of the utmost importance that this be done, as we would otherwise be damaged, stunted, misshapen, unable—recall Kaspar Hauser—to live a human life.

To be *held* in personhood is to interact with other persons who recognize us as persons and respond accordingly. Much of this holding therefore has to do with the narratives we create or borrow from the common stock to make depictions of who a particular person is. These depictions are our personal identities; what they depict is the self, understood as the embodied locus of idiosyncratic causation and experience. Identities are the personae we perform in our dealings with others; they indicate how we are supposed to act and how we wish or expect to be treated. All persons have personal identities, even if they are incapable of contributing their own, first-person stories to the narrative tissue that represents them. But those who are capable of full participation in personhood act on the basis of the stories by which they understand who they are, the stories others use to make sense of who they are, and the stories they themselves contribute to others' identities.

Holding someone in personhood doesn't necessarily involve what I have been calling identity-work, as sometimes the simple recognition that someone *is* a person who is expressing a facet of her personality is enough to prompt a response. You're leaving the convenience store and an entering stranger smiles at you and says it's getting colder outside; he's holding you in personhood. Or the clerk doesn't even glance at you when she takes your money; she's letting you go. As one-time events, these exchanges neither make nor mar you, but if no clerk ever looked at you—say, you are Amish and your community has shunned you, or you are terribly disfigured and people are repulsed by you—the many little instances you might experience of being let go could make it very difficult to hold yourself in personhood.

While exchanges between strangers don't require much knowledge of who the parties are, note that even in the simple convenience store transaction, the actors bear the identities of clerk and

customer. Other day-to-day interactions are more complicated, and it's here that identities play a larger role. It's not that people ever express the entirety of their identity. When, for example, you find your friend weeping in the kitchen, she's displaying how she feels, not performing all the personae that are aspects of who she is. But she is performing a particular persona in distress, and it's that to which you respond, drawing on your own sense of who you are in relation to her. The right way to respond might be to let go of the facet of her identity depicting her as a drama queen, or perhaps excellent holding would involve sitting her down in a quiet corner and asking her what's wrong. However you respond, you are answerable to the moral norms arising from your and her identities.

FILLING IN THE SKETCH

The picture of persons I've offered is really just the merest sketch of the interpersonal exchanges that let us be fully human. For one thing, I've said too little about the things aside from people that hold us in our identities. A piece of land, a house, a neighborhood, an office—these can all proclaim or remind us of who we are, so that if they are invaded or taken from us, we feel personally violated. The material objects that furnish these places can also play a role in maintaining our identities. Familiar routines are important as well, as are hobbies and (for some of us) scholarly interests. So are impersonal institutions such as banking and the stock market. When these things let us go—when, for example, a mortgage foreclosure forces us from the house we've lived in for the last thirty years—the blow to our identities can be devastating.

More also needs to be said about the ways we hold *ourselves* in, or let go of, various aspects of our identities. When you leave home

for college or your first apartment, you can no longer make sense of yourself with the stories that depict you in the bosom of your family. When your wife divorces you, good letting go requires you to allow the stories of yourself as her spouse to drop out of your self-conception so that you can begin to forge newer, longer-lasting relationships. When you outgrow a passion, your penchant for dressing like a skinhead, or your tendency to find someone to blame when things go wrong, you must let go of the stories that depict you in those ways or you can't fully embrace the change to your identity. Drastic alterations to your body make the same demand: when you drop or gain a lot of weight, give birth, lose a limb, or just get old, you'll have to scuttle outdated self-depictions if you are to adapt yourself well to your new embodiment. And, of course, you can hold yourself badly, either because damaging master narratives that represent your social kind as morally subpar have infiltrated your consciousness or because of the many other ways in which the four moments of personhood can misfire.

How we hold others in their identities typically has some kind of effect on our own. Personal identities are so often *reciprocal*. Obvious examples include husband-wife, teacher-student, parent-child, doctor-patient, coworker, and friend. Think, though, of the less obvious examples. When the stories you use to identify dark-skinned people represent them as dirty, lazy, sneaky, and stupid, you are a racist, and while you are unlikely to see yourself that way, the identity is nevertheless properly yours. When you see most other people as fair game for whatever you want to do to them, you construct yourself as a bully—although here again, you aren't likely to view yourself in that light.

Similarly, when Charlotte and Charlie, each doing it differently, hold their father as he lies dying, they express something important about who Charlotte and Charlie are. They hold themselves and

each other in their ongoing identities as loving daughter and son—but the way they do it gives those identities a deeper, richer dimension than they’ve had before. When the girl sitting on the stoop in the dawn begins to call her fetus into personhood, she simultaneously claims for herself the identity of a pregnant woman, moving herself ever closer to motherhood as she carries out the work of her pregnancy. Similarly, how Ellie and Jack-Jack’s parents shape their children’s moral identities says quite a lot about who Mama and Daddy are, morally speaking—as do Emily’s actions as she tries to hold her demented father in his identity.

There’s also much more to be said about preservative love. I want to reserve that term for the love that preserves people from harm—including the harm of being excluded from or cast out of personhood, or the wrong of being altogether forgotten after we die. The examples I’ve offered have all focused on holding, except for the cautionary tale of Kaspar Hauser that shows the morally disastrous consequences of letting go. I think, however, that letting go can also be an act of preservative love. I don’t mean letting go of someone’s life when the time has come for the person to die—that can be the most loving thing to do, but I don’t think of it as *preservative* love. What I mean, rather, is letting go of stories that you have used to depict someone unfairly—the sort of thing Iris Murdoch has in mind when she offers the example of a mother who feels hostility toward her daughter-in-law. The mother dislikes the woman’s accent and the way she dresses, sees her as vulgar, and believes her son has married beneath him. Time passes, and on giving “careful and just attention” to her daughter-in-law but also to herself, she acknowledges that she has been prejudiced, snobbish, and jealous. So she lets go of the old ways she’s characterized her daughter-in-law, now finding her “not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile

but delightfully youthful, and so on” (Murdoch 1970, 17–18). To let go of the stories that portrayed the daughter-in-law unjustly and replace them with kinder, more charitable stories is arguably an act of preservative love that changes something about who the mother-in-law is as well.

Preservative love also sometimes requires letting go so that we can participate minimally decently in the practice of personhood. Here I’m thinking of stories that depict someone as too crazy, too monstrously misshapen, or too evil to even be human. For the reasons I’ve already rehearsed, by merely existing, anyone capable of communicating her mental states places an imperatival demand on us to scuttle those stories and replace them with ones that let us identify her as a person—maybe not our favorite person, but a person all the same.

But what, it might be objected, of human beings who really *are* evil or violently insane—tyrants who foment genocide, torturers, the man who recently murdered twenty elementary school children and seven of their teachers? Must we obey the dictates of preservative love even toward the likes of them? Arguably, we must. If there’s anything to be learned from the sorry track record of man’s inhumanity to man, it’s that we are a species quick to inflict horrific suffering on others of our kind out of what often seems to be a sincere conviction of the others’ moral inferiority. These convictions are so regularly wrong, so regularly used in attempts to justify the inexcusable, that we ought never to form them. None of us can know everything about another human being, and we certainly can’t operate on the assumption that our own motives are always morally pure. Fallible and imperfect as we all are, we simply aren’t wise enough to make these kinds of judgments.

Finally, I want to emphasize how *implicit* holding and letting go generally are, perhaps because they come so naturally to us. In this

respect, identity-work resembles Wittgenstein's observations about aesthetic judgments, where aesthetic adjectives play hardly any role at all—the phenomenon Lovibond also notes in conversations about moral matters. When everybody understands how to hold and when to let go, much of what is important can remain unspoken, because the conversation “proceeds against the background of an essentially shared evaluative environment” (Lovibond 2002, 42). In letting go of Joel's self-proclaimed identity as a victim of his father's indifference, Francine doesn't say, “Don't play the victimized son, Joel,” she says, “You *asshole*, Joel—shut up!” When I held Carla in her identity as my playmate, I didn't say, “You are my playmate,” I said, “You're not so heavy, are you, my baby?” And when the man in the black overcoat and top hat lets go of Kaspar Hauser's personhood, he says nothing at all—he just does it.

If holding and letting go are generally carried out inexplicitly, so, too, are *conversations* about holding and letting go. Just as conversations about right and wrong often proceed by talk of what one might do, or declaring that one couldn't possibly do something else, or pointing out how late the train might be, so, too, conversations about holding and letting go are couched in language far removed from the words I've been using for it. You and your friends are having drinks in a bar and they start talking in a very ignorant way about something that, as they know, lies squarely in your field of expertise. You don't like being ignored, so you protest, “What am I—chopped liver?” You watch Jason characteristically botch yet another job: “Yep, that's Jason.” The cardiologist schedules a meeting with you and your husband to tell you that your grandmother is now experiencing multiple organ failure. After explaining this as gently as he can, he says, “It's time to rethink the goals of Ms. Sanchez's treatment.”

Although descriptions of identity-work play hardly any role at all in how the work is actually done, it has seemed to me that this work is too important to be left altogether undescribed. As I began to write about it, though, I came to see how hard it was to find words to characterize it, and that is why I settled, in the main, for stories that depict various forms of the practice over the span of a lifetime. On continued reflection, I came to think that this might be the best method after all—to show, by means of many and varied examples, precisely what follows from the fact of our essentially social nature.

A FINAL THOUGHT

It may seem as if, in focusing so heavily on that social component of human selves, I have lost sight altogether of the equally important individual component. We are, after all, not only what our societies make of us. At least if we are mature and endowed with ordinary abilities, we can also defy our society's expectations and decide for ourselves how we want our lives to go.

I don't mean to underestimate that capacity for choice. It's just as vital to the human makeup as the social component is. Indeed, we can think of human selves as comprising two intertwined strands that are often in tension and even, in certain cultures and at certain times in history, become unbalanced because one strand takes ascendancy over the other. Call one strand "the given" and the other "the chosen."¹ "The given" consists of our first and much of our second natures, the age and society into which we were born, the relationships with which we were encumbered at birth, the identities others impose on us, our first and maybe second language, and

1. Here's another distinction I owe to James Lindemann Nelson.

morality itself. “The chosen” embraces our status as agents who choose freely and act on the basis of those choices and includes our ability to reason, our free will, our autonomy, and our capacity to reflectively endorse or repudiate the considerations that bear on what we do and what we think.

Other things being equal, a self-understanding that values both these strands is better equipped to permit each of them to serve as a check on the excesses of the other. Excessive choice produces what Samuel Scheffler has called voluntarism (Scheffler 1997, 191–95)—the fantasy that all our obligations are a function of our choices, that we are atomistic individuals unencumbered by relationships to others, in complete control of the matters for which we bear responsibility. Excessive givenness produces fatalism—the fantasy that breeds undue amounts of moral deference to authority, trivializes the importance of our critical faculty, and requires the oppressed to be content with their oppression.

To avoid either extreme, both strands must pull in harness, not only within human selves, but also in the societies populated by those selves. In the current era, we are deep in the throes of one extreme. Americans in particular place utmost value on autonomy and (among their philosophers, anyway) hyperrationality; the voluntaristic fantasy is strongly in the ascendant. My hope is that this book, through its account of persons who without other people could not be persons at all, might help in some small way to tip the balance slightly in the other direction.