

POTEAT AND THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTIFYING PERSONS



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Keywords: William Poteat, category vs. personal logic, character logic, reflexive self reference, personal responsibility, personal identity, personal persistence, personal presence

ABSTRACT

William Poteat's work is suggestive of an account of personal identity. The reflexive use of "I" in "I shot the sheriff" places the act of shooting the sheriff in the context of a story—the story of the agent who reflexively refers to himself as "I"—that contextualizes its significance. Thus, I argue, Poteat shifts the logic of inferences about persons and their acts from the standard Aristotelian category logic to a character logic that represents them as mutually implied and their moments as mutually inclusive.

I liked the fact that the 2014 Yale Conference on Bill Poteat's legacy was titled, "The Primacy of Persons." Not only does that phrase serve as the title of one of his books of essays, but it was what his philosophical and personal life was all about. But that title is even more provocative today than it was a few decades ago. Strong philosophical voices demand we give up purporting to identify persons at all, and for the most part the social and behavioral sciences have given in to that skepticism as well. But there are a number of modes of reasoning that cannot, without grave consequences, give up on identifying persons. I am thinking here particularly of the reasoning we do to reach grounds for making moral and legal judgments.

Poteat's approach to the problem of personal identity, particularly in his earlier writing and teaching, was often to direct our attention to what was unique about using "the first personal pronoun singular, nominative case." What he found remarkable was the "reflexivity" he saw in its use. "I" has two references, he wrote. It "does not just

name a person, such as does ‘William H. Poteat.’ It names the namer. It recoils on language and its user” (Poteat 1960, 413). “It is about, I will now call them, *acts*; but it is, *for me*, also about something more, namely, the actor” (Poteat 1960, 412).

Recall how subversive all this sounded back in the ’60s. By framing the problem of identifying a person in terms of the active awareness of someone using the pronoun “I,” Poteat bypassed the fruitless approach then standard among Anglo-American analytic philosophers of personal identity. They took on the challenge as one of finding the quality, attribute or other category membership that qualified a subject as a person. Though the dominant voices in that tradition have long since given up the notion of substantial selfhood, most of those who continued to speak of persons spoke of them as though they could be identified prior to and other than by what they did. For P. F. Strawson (1959) a person is an individual with both states of consciousness and corporeal characteristics; for Harry Frankfurt (1982), someone with second order desires; for Lynne Rudder Baker, someone with a continuing first-person perspective (2000). In contrast, when Poteat pointed out that in stating what I did or am doing, like “I shot the sheriff” or “I hope you’re doing well,” I refer both to my act and its agency. That philosophical move represented a radical departure from the usual assumptions about the challenge of identifying persons. It made the being of persons radically and irreducibly *actual*. It recognized that persons have intentional being. The form of their identity is that of a characterization of action.

There are, of course, a variety of reasons one might have for claiming to identify a person. My interest is in moral or legal ones, such as determining whether someone is personally responsible for some harm his action caused. This has led me to realize that, as indebted as I am to the ideas of Michael Polanyi, the distinctions called for are different from the ones he provided. His aim was to call attention to the overlooked participation of a person in *all* of his or her knowing and acting. Moral and legal judgments rely on discerning when to take someone’s lame joke personally or hold him personally responsible for paying his brother’s debts. That means the sphere of actions that we hold someone personally responsible for is a subset of his actions in general, not all of them as it is for Polanyi.

Poteat was primarily vested in the wider Polyanian concern for the personal coefficient of all our knowing and acting. But I would argue that in drawing our attention to the reflexive use of “I” he suggested a way to delimit that facet of personal coefficient wherein a person is subject to moral and legal judgment in his agency. There is, I would argue, a coordination and comprehension among the actions for which we hold people personally responsible. They are resolved in a way akin to the way a narrative is resolved. The “I,” or who the person is, is identified in a characterization whose meaning is disclosed in a narrative context. That means the person judged responsible has a significant form akin to that of a character in a story. Simply being active is not enough. To recall one of Poteat’s favorite topics, Mozart’s Don Juan was certainly active

(*in Ispagna son gia mille e tre!*) but he was only musically active, ever disappearing into the moment, never coming to himself as a narratively coordinated actor. He had no history and thus no identity as a person.

So, using the reflexive “I” means not only being aware of what one is doing in its immediacy but being aware of advancing a story. I am suggesting that in using the first personal pronoun “I” reflexively there is implicit in one’s awareness both one’s act and its narrative context.

As far as I know, Poteat never set out to develop a notion of reflexivity with moral and legal reasoning in mind. He too was more interested in engaging the reductionists of his day. But I think the path Poteat set us upon—by making reflexivity central to our grasp of what is distinctive about personal agency—is suggestive for identifying persons forensically.

First, that approach forces us to recognize that the logic governing personal identity is not categorical in the Aristotelian sense, which is to say that narratives do not identify persons by specifying category membership or exclusion. The patterns of inference available in what passes in this respect for standard reasoning cannot grasp the being of a person.

Let me briefly indicate two crucial differences between reasoning about persons with claims about *categories* of actions and reasoning about persons with claims about *characters* of action.¹ The two logics, category and character, relate acts and actors differently. To understand the difference, consider how the notion of reflexivity can be heard in the very word “character.” It refers both to the significance of an action and to the identity of the person who intends it. A person *does* something we characterize as an action and a person *is* an identifiable character of action.

The first difference has to do with the inferential relationship between a person’s character and the character of his action. It is, let me suggest, one of mutual implication. More formally, in ascriptions of personal responsibility if person P acts in a way that we characterize as C, C is implicit in P and P is implicit in C.²

That is to say, we cannot understand C without understanding who P is and we cannot understand P without understanding the narrative context that gives C its full meaning. C is implicit in P because P’s personal story includes C: provided P is acting in accord with the resolution his story is projected to actualize, his resolution has his present action C as an ingredient. P is implicit in C because the narrative context for C is part of its significance. (To understand Sidney Carton’s act of submitting to the guillotine as the courageous and self-sacrificing deed it was, we have to know how that act fit into his story, which is to say into his life.) That is the intuitive truth we bear witness to whenever we insist that to be personally responsible for some act someone must be *implicated* in that act, *enfolded* in the narrative context in which we understand what he did.

A second distinctive feature of reasoning with claims about characters of action has to do with how such reasoning relates actions and agents temporally. A character of action has its being in its moment, a moment with a duration that stretches from inception to completion. It turns out that the moment of a person's present action and the moment of his present character of resolve are mutually inclusive. Thus we understand ourselves to be present in our action and our action to be a window into who we are.

Recognizing these distinctive features of character logic opens up possibilities for reasoning not available in category logic. For example, reasoning about actions using categories invites one to account for them causally. That is because, without the conceptual capacity for grasping durational moment of an action, we have to treat it as the out-*come* of certain causal antecedents, an *e-vent* that takes place *at* a certain point in time. This is counter-intuitive. In our awareness, an act's moment is rarely, if ever, punctiliar; it moves through the time it takes to accomplish, making it variable in its duration since it includes all and only the moments of movement by which it is accomplished. Accordingly, we find it reasonable to think of some actions as "momentous" and others "of little moment."

Persons then are momentary beings without being ephemeral beings. In fact, as creatures of resolve we can be given to achievements whose projected accomplishment outlives our mortal lives by informing the character of the movement of others who come after us. Many (if not all) of us have followed in making some of the moves our teacher Poteat made philosophically, so our celebration of his historical legacy is not merely academic. It is our legacy, now part of what continues to inform our work and set our agenda. That makes what we celebrate as his life work truly momentous.

ENDNOTES

¹For a fuller exploration of these ideas see Prust 2004.

²"Imply" and "implicate" mean to "enfold" or "enwrap," and being "implicit in" means to be "enfolded in." Traditional category logic enfolds one category in another. In character logic, the implication of a person in an act is due to both being folded into a narrative wherein the part informs the meaning of the whole and the whole informs the meaning of the part.

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