

Hilde Lindemann

*Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2014

ISBN 978-0-19-975492-2

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Hilde Lindemann has long urged a more expansive and socially based understanding of personhood and personal identity than is the norm. *Holding and Letting Go* provides a mature and developed version of this understanding and explores the fascinating, difficult, and largely unappreciated moral questions it engenders.

Personhood, on Lindeman's view, does not consist in the possession of a particular set of attributes or high-level cognitive capacities, as it is usually taken to do. It is instead generated by participation in a form of life in which one is seen and treated as a person by others. Individual personal identities, meanwhile, "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" (4). These identities serve as broad, implicit guidelines for what we can be expected to do and how we should be treated.

Since personhood and personal identity are social practices, they depend not only upon an individual's expression of who and what she is, but also on others recognizing that expression and responding appropriately. This raises a host of questions about the nature and extent of our obligation to respond to others in ways that support or "hold" them in their personhood and personal identity, along with corresponding questions about when it is permissible, or even desirable, to let them go. Further questions arise about the precise mechanisms of this sort of holding and letting go: how it is done well and when it misfires. Lindemann investigates these and related questions with great insight and sensitivity in this original and thought-provoking book, shedding new light on central questions in bioethics along the way.

One of the great strengths of Lindemann's work is her acknowledgment and acceptance of the diversity and complexity of the phenomena she is investigating. In this book she delves directly into the messiness and ambiguity that is human life, resisting attempts to oversimplify and addressing moral quandaries as they occur *in vivo*. This can be tricky, and here it helps a great deal that in addition to her philosophical acumen, Lindemann possesses a real gift for

storytelling. This allows her to structure her investigation around cases depicting particular people in particular (but typical) circumstances. Each scenario illustrates a different life phase or a kind of complication that can arise with respect to the practice of personhood. Jumping off from these cases, Lindemann applies a combination of rigorous argumentation, critical analysis of existing philosophical work, and keen insight into the human condition to explore instances of holding and letting go in context, reflecting in each instance on how it is done, how it can go wrong, and what is at stake if it does.

The book opens with a case Lindemann has discussed before, that of her own sister Carla, who was born with severe hydrocephaly. Lindemann argues forcefully that although Carla never met the criteria for personhood laid out in most standard views, she was a person with an identity nonetheless. The constitution of Carla's personhood and her identity was largely a one-sided affair, the result of "identity-work" undertaken by her family and other intimates with little input from Carla herself. A careful look at this case brings the social aspect of personhood into sharp relief, providing an overall introduction to the view of personhood as a practice. It also provides a context in which to describe the limitations on identity-construction, laying the groundwork for responding to inevitable worries about the potential arbitrariness of a view that sees personhood and identity as socially constructed. This discussion also yields the important conclusion that "the duty to hold in personhood anyone who could be so held is impersonally authoritative" (24). A careful distinction is made, however, between holding someone in personhood and holding onto their lives. It may be possible, Lindemann suggests, that in some tragic circumstances the right thing to do is to let someone die.

The next five chapters look at holding and letting go as they occur over the span of a life, beginning with an account at the way in which fetuses are called into personhood and concluding with end-of-life issues. Discussion of the beginnings of personhood is centered around the scenario of an unplanned pregnancy and an attempt to unpack what Lindemann calls the "abortion intuition." Many women, she says, express the view that although abortion is not morally wrong and should be legal, they themselves could never have one. Understanding what stands behind this peculiar intuition will provide insight into "what we are undertaking when we undertake a pregnancy and what we are stopping when we stop one" (34). Here Lindemann describes the active, *proleptic*, relationship a woman has to a fetus she has decided to carry to term through which she begins to forge an identity for the child the fetus will become. A fetus is not yet a person, on Lindemann's view, and cannot be constituted as a person during gestation since it cannot express mental activity in a way others can recognize and respond to. Pregnancy should thus be understood as an invitation to prepare the way for the fetus to become a person by making a start on the web of stories and interactions that will constitute the child's personal identity after birth. This is an invitation that deserves to be carefully considered, but there can be legitimate reasons for turning it down.

The story of Ellie and Jack-Jack, two young children who get lost in the woods, serves as the launching point for a discussion of identity-formation. It describes the ways in which children are inducted into the practice of personhood, learning to give as well as receive recognition and, eventually, to express themselves as full-fledged moral agents. Here there is a fascinating discussion of "second nature" that helps to fill in what it means for an identity to be socially constructed and demonstrates how deep socially constructed facts can be. We are also reminded

of the fact that identity has a developmental arc, and cannot be understood as static throughout a life.

"Ordinary identity-work" (holding and letting go between adults with formed identities) is introduced through the story of a public fight in which Joel, slightly drunk and full of indignation, lashes out at his father for perceived slights and omissions from childhood. Analysis of the roles played by the participants in this family drama yields a sense of the delicate, ongoing interactions that secure our identities. Successful identity-construction requires an expression of who one is, recognition of what one expresses, and appropriate response to that recognition. Problems can arise with respect to any of these elements, Lindemann says, and she explores with great deftness how these difficulties occur and what can be done to get things back on track when they do. This discussion brings to the fore one of the important themes of the book: the need to accept human imperfection. We are fragile creatures, frequently clumsy in our interactions despite the best of intentions and in ways that are all too understandable. Our vision is often occluded by our sensitivities, vanities, and insecurities, and sometimes we are just obtuse. Holding and letting go thus often misfire not because of pernicious motives, but because we are human and relationships are complicated and difficult. We therefore need to be able to forgive others when they falter in holding us, and to forgive ourselves when we unintentionally fail to hold others well.

Lindemann also analyzes a range of cases that pose special challenges with respect to identity-work. There are persons with dementia whose behavior is at odds with their previously expressed identities (a father who acts out and causes injury to his daughter, a lifelong vegetarian who insists on being served meatballs, an agitated mother in a nursing home); transpersons in an unaccepting social world who have "impossible identities" because they cannot honestly express their own self-understanding; and hypocrites and wantons whose behavior, for different reasons, cannot be taken as an expression of identity. Each case raises different kinds of questions about what constitutes appropriate recognition and response in the circumstances depicted, and these are explored with compassion and repeated acknowledgment that sometimes it is just not clear what to do.

The survey of different issues connected with the practice of personhood concludes with a discussion of the end of life. Naturally the question raised in the opening chapter about when we might be right to let go of a person's life reappears here, where it is focused through the story of Edmund. During a serious health crisis, Edmund is in danger of receiving medical interventions that, as he has made clear to his trusted friend and medical decision-maker Charlie, he does not want. Lindemann argues that Charlie's insistence that Edmund be allowed to die can be seen as an instance of impeccable holding insofar as he defends what he knows to be Edmund's autonomously formed critical interests. As always, however, there is clear acknowledgment that these matters are never cut and dried, and that everything depends upon the details. This is made especially clear in a poignant discussion of the heartbreaking disputes that can arise when family members and other intimates have different relations to the patient and depend upon him in different ways for the maintenance of their own identities.

*Holding and Letting Go* is deceptively easy to read. The prose is so delightful and the observations so incisive that it is difficult to put it down. But a great deal of hard philosophical

work is being done in these pages, and there is intricate engagement with a wide range of important contemporary positions. What emerges is a rich, new structure for thinking about the nature of identity and its relation to the kinds of ethical dilemmas and difficulties we face every day. We are shown not just a compelling and thought-provoking set of views about these issues, but a new way of thinking about them, one that promises to shed some light where things have been notoriously opaque.

There are, of course, places where someone might reject Lindemann's methods or results. Some will undoubtedly be disappointed with the rather impressionistic and organic set of principles for proper holding and letting go that falls out of the cases, and would prefer a more systematic set of rules. Such disappointment is understandable, and Lindemann acknowledges it. She explains, however, that when she tried to describe the moral dimensions of the practice of personhood, she discovered how difficult it was to put into words and so settled for stories depicting these issues. She adds that after the fact she "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" (209). I am inclined to agree with her, and whatever one's philosophical tastes, it would be difficult to deny that this method is very fruitful in her hands.

The view of personhood and personal identity described here is unabashedly constructivist, and this is likely to worry many people as well. Some will find such a view implausible, insisting that there must be facts about who someone is that are independent of how she is treated. Others will find it morally problematic, worrying about the implications for those who are marginalized if an individual's personhood depends upon recognition by others. Lindemann is sensitive to both concerns and does her best to allay them. Using a broadly Wittgensteinian approach, she pauses often to demonstrate the ways in which the social construction she describes is not arbitrary but constrained by facts about the world and about us. Concerns about the potential moral implications of socially constructed identities can, moreover, be seen as all the more reason to undertake the kind of investigation pursued in this book. Precisely because we are responsible for the personhood of others, we must be morally alive to the possession of this responsibility in a way we often are not.

My own point of disagreement concerns the special role given to autonomously chosen actions in defining personal identity. Especially in her discussions of the end of life, Lindemann suggests that behaviors that are autonomously chosen (figured, roughly, in terms of Frankfurt-style, higher-order endorsement) are more truly expressive of our identities than those that are not, and carry a special kind of weight in determining who we really are. Since identity is inherently bound up with morality in Lindemann's view, it is not entirely surprising that she would hold this position, and it is certainly a widely held view. Given the beautifully expanded understanding of personhood and of what is morally salient that Lindemann has defended, however, this struck me as a bit of backsliding. Why shouldn't the parts of our lives and interactions that are not about autonomous moral agency be as significant to expressing who we are as full-blown autonomous choices? Since we are social beings, relationships that are not strongly agential in this way should, it seems, also be identity-defining. Lindemann does not, of course, deny this, but once the capacity for autonomy emerges, it seems to trump other forms of expression in ways I am not sure it should. Lindemann has her reasons for giving special emphasis to our identities as moral

agents, and she explains them well, but this was one of the very few places I found myself somewhat unconvinced.

All of this, though, is just grist for the mill. One of the great delights of the book is that it models the kind of openness and receptivity that it calls for in our dealings with one another, leaving plenty of room for disagreements of the sort I have just described and plotting a course for understanding their source and working together to resolve them.  *Holding and Letting Go*  is a sophisticated, tender-hearted, and clear-eyed view of persons that provides original and compelling insights into what we are and why it matters. We will be engaging with it for a long time to come.