Preface

The personal identity problem has enjoyed a revival among analytic philosophers over the last three decades. Since questions of personal identity are of fundamental interest outside philosophy, there is some reason to hope that in this area philosophy will do what it is popularly thought to do—apply rigorous standards of argument and investigation to basic problems of human existence. A glance at the contemporary literature on personal identity, however, quickly disappoints these expectations. Instead of questions of self-knowledge, self-expression, and authenticity, we find discussions of the necessary and sufficient connections between entities called individual "person time-slices" which allow us to say they are slices of the same person. These creatures inhabiting philosophical theories of identity seem to have little to do with persons as we know them, and the concerns about identity these theorists address seem far removed from the compelling identity issues familiar to us from lived experience, psychology, and literature.

The contemporary philosophical discussion of identity omits a great deal that seems central to the topic of personal identity. This book is motivated by my own disappointment. My goal is to articulate more clearly what contemporary analytic work on personal identity neglects. In Part I, I consider central issues from within the contemporary debate, arguing that current analytic identity theorists have failed even on their own terms. In Part II, I step outside the confines of standard personal identity literature, using resources and issues neglected by the standard discussion to provide more robust and satisfying perspectives on questions about persons and personal identity. Here I focus on our experience of life as lived history, investigating how personal identity is linked to the capacity to construct coherent autobiographical narratives and to enter into the activities and social interactions that define the lives of persons.

Much of the preliminary work involved in understanding and criticizing
the standard debate on personal identity got under way at Harvard University. I am grateful to the many friends and teachers there who guided me through the preliminary phases and have continued to provide support, insight, and inspiration. First and foremost, I thank Stanley Cavell, who helped shape my most basic sensibilities by demonstrating exciting new ways to engage with traditional philosophical debates. His influence can be felt on every page of the book. I also thank Burton Dreben, Juliet Floyd, Sharon Lloyd, Nick Pappas, Hilary Putnam, Tim Scanlon, Miriam Solomon, and Paul Weithman, each of whom made a crucial contribution to my project in one way or another, and Jennifer Whiting, who gave me my first systematic introduction to the topic of personal identity. I also thank Harvard for generous financial support and the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship Foundation for granting me a Charlotte Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship for the academic year 1987–88.

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