

Response to Stéphane Luchini and Miriam Teschl

By/Par **John B. Davis**

I thank Stéphane Luchini and Miriam Teschl for their detailed summary of my book and its arguments. I will restrict my response to the points at which they raise issues in disagreement and make criticisms or where other clarifications might be helpful.

One ‘cautious remark’ Luchini and Teschl make is that my notion of personal identity is very narrow, because it is based on the idea of identity as invariability, and that this understanding not only overlooks a distinction between numerical identity and qualitative identity ‘that refers to maximal degree of resemblance between a thing and itself or between several things that are numerically different,’ but also makes identity implicitly a matter of qualitative sameness. It is then suggested that this produces a problem because identity through change presupposes change while the notion of qualitative identity rules it out. These arguments are drawn from S. Ferret.

I do not see the problem here because I do not believe qualitative sameness extends to all respects in which an entity can be identified across change. The expression ‘qualitative sameness’ means sameness with respect to some set of qualities. There is no implication as I see it that the expression refers to *all* qualities of an entity. Thus identity through change can both include sameness with respect to some set of qualities (those in terms of which an entity is identified) and difference associated with change in other qualities. That is, invariability is compatible with change, or invariability applies with respect to some set of qualities but not all qualities. Further, I find the notion that qualitative identity ‘precludes any change by definition’ perplexing. How exactly is this an issue of identity in the first place?

These issues re-arise in connection with the comments Luchini and Teschl make about my reading of Locke and Hume. Rather than my ‘philosophical standards’ approach using the individuation and reidentification criteria, they ‘prefer identity to be seen as a dynamical process,’ where this would not mean finding something unchanging through time.’ Hume is then cited as a proponent of the dynamical view on the basis of his belief that self-identical things do not exist, and my reading in terms of invariability or unchangingness through time is said to be a wrong entry point for thinking about identity.

A bit further in their discussion the ‘dynamical concept of identity’ is then associated with *who* an individual is, where this concerns individuals as self-reflexive and conscious, as compared to *what* an individual is, where this concerns seeing individuals in terms of their

preferences. My problems with this distinction and the ‘dynamical concept of identity’ associated with it are two.

First, the idea of individuals as self-reflexive and conscious is not clearly in neoclassical economics if at all, which is the subject of discussion in this part of the review. Indeed I favor this kind of view of the individual in connection with the second half, heterodox economics part of the book, and while I would not use the idea of a ‘dynamical concept of identity,’ the motivation that seems to be behind it – that individuals have some principle of development – is one to which I am sympathetic.

Second, I find the idea of a ‘dynamical concept of identity’ awkward in then it appears to be a strategy for saying people are explained by change without admitting at the same time that this *single* principle constitutes a basis for unchanging identity. Indeed the expression itself includes both ‘dynamical’ and ‘identity.’ Or as put above, the focus seems to be about some single principle that explains who a single person is. From this perspective, the criticism of my ‘philosophical standards’ approach seems mistaken, since this alternative principle is still a principle of invariability or unchangingness, albeit one that builds in a process of change in the individual. I am all for this general idea, but I believe it still falls within the standard discourse on identity. The reference to *who*, then, is helpful for emphasizing the human agent as reflexive and conscious, but does not imply that there is not also a *what* at issue – here this single dynamical principle.

The question of *who* also returns in the discussion of my socially embedded individual conception as someone able to self-impose the implications of collective intentions upon themselves. Luchini and Teschl ask ‘who or what is this self on which individuals impose?’ They then go on to charge that,

‘the individual’s capacity to self-impose, which serves as basis for distinguishing between people, can only do this, because distinct individuals are already presupposed. It is the self that exists on which self-imposition is done by individuals thus individuated. In that sense, Davis does what orthodox economists do, he assumes different individuals to exist.’

I think this gets the individuation argument precisely backwards. Self-imposing does not presuppose distinctness; the context of the argument is that individuals are socially embedded in social groups, therefore presumably *not* distinct as individual agents. Indeed, this is the whole problem the chapter is meant to address – whether such individuals can be thought to be distinct in this way. Self-imposing, I thus argue, is something that only distinct individuals could do; therefore individuals can be thought to be distinct *despite* being socially embedded. Rather than presuppose individuality, the argument derives it from the practice of self-imposingness which we see displayed in social collective intentionality contexts.

Accordingly, the issue of *who* is clear. Just as Luchini and Teschl suggest earlier, the *who* is exactly the individual who acts reflexively and consciously, specifically in connection in social interactions with others in groups. But there is a difference here between what I say and what they say that needs emphasizing. We *only* learn this about individuals from

observing the way social groups exhibit collective intentions, and *then* infer individuals exist in those groups as distinct agents. In contrast, Luchini and Teschl do not begin with the social phenomena of groups as I do, but ask *who* the individual is, thus it seems presupposing we are talking about distinct individuals just as they charge me to do.

Luchini and Teschl are also skeptical about the existence of the capacity for being able to self-impose in people. But then I wonder what the foundations are of their dynamical concept of identity. They emphasize reflexivity, but this seems to be no less a capacity to self-examine and self-evaluate. A similar point applies to being conscious. Not all creatures are conscious. That human beings are then seems to be a special capacity that they possess. I don't find it particularly controversial to ascribe certain capacities to people. It also seems to not be a problem that developmental psychologists insist on a state of maturity when those capacities can be said to be characteristic of people.

Luchini and Teschl are also critical that I do not talk about preferences to explain motivations behind intentions. But I never deny people have preferences. My view is simply that they are often socially constructed, and that in any event they do not form a basis for individual identity.

A final point of concern for Luchini and Teschl is that my discussion of mainstream economics does not address the most recent work, some of which addresses identity. Partly this decision not to go beyond mainstream economics circa 1980 was based on the need I felt existed to establish the issue of identity in connection the principal research program in the field, namely, neoclassical economics. Since the issue is essentially new to economics, my goal was to communicate with the bulk of the profession as opposed to new developments which are indeed not even known to many more traditional researchers in the field. But I disagree with two claims they make about recent work in economics. First, they say there is a "general movement and interest among economists to render economics more real and to look over and above standard economic theorising in order to include more sociological, psychological or socio-psychological concerns."

I think this is excessively optimistic both with respect to the degree of attachment that most economists have today to these new approaches, and generally with respect to the commitment to realism. Indeed it is still a matter for debate whether the new movements are really significantly more realist than neoclassical economics.

Second, the extent to which recent work addresses identity is quite limited, with only a very small number of papers thus far. Moreover, those papers which exist are virtually silent on personal identity, and have consequently addressed the concept of identity only as social identity. My current research, in fact, is aimed at investigating thinking about identity in recent economics.

In sum, despite these differences, I thank Luchini and Teschl for their thoughtful reading of my book, and welcome their future contributions to the subject of identity and economics.