CHAPTER 15

Identity Is Essentially Moral

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What explains the deep connection between morality and the folk concept of personal identity?

This relationship may seem mysterious, until we recognize that identity perception is primarily a process for tracking moral agents, rather than differentiating individuals.

Identity takes up a vast amount of real estate in the field of psychology. Broadly speaking, identity is how you think of yourself and other people. It concerns what features go into, collectively, making someone who they are. The term *identity* often evokes categories of social membership: gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and so on. But it's a big space; a lot goes into our identities. There is also, for instance, our bodies and life histories and intellect and character.

The focus of this chapter is one aspect of identity in particular: the puzzle of diachronic identity. Something maintains diachronic identity if it continues to be the same with itself over time. The puzzle is this: How is it that a person can change radically over time, yet seem to be the same person as before? And how is it that relatively minor tweaks can lead a person to seem fundamentally altered, even unrecognizable?

By some lights, this is a philosophical question, but it is also a psychological one. The factors that give rise to the sense of identity continuity over time—and the factors that break it—are crucial for understanding how people think about personal identity.

The puzzle of diachronic identity is well illustrated by conflicting accounts of what happens to identity in the wake of brain damage. Consider the infamous case of Phineas Gage, who survived a freak accident that saw a metal rod the size of a javelin perforate his skull. Though his intellectual abilities remained intact, Gage became so intemperate and volatile that his friends said "Gage was no longer Gage" (Macmillan, 2000). Contrast this with the actor Gene Wilder, who passed away of Alzheimer's disease in 2016. His nephew insisted that the illness "never stole his ability to recognize those that were closest to him, nor took command of his central-gentle-life affirming core personality. It took enough, but not that" (Miller, 2016). Wilder, even at his most incapacitated, remained Wilder until his dying day.

There is no reason to be coy about our punchline, particularly as it is embedded in the title and preamble of this chapter. Emerg-

ing research suggests that the greatest factor in establishing diachronic personal identity is the continuity of moral capacities. In this chapter, I go over the evidence for this claim and suggest a possible explanation.

Some History

For the past few hundred years, most discussions of diachronic personal identity have revolved around the putative importance of memory. Under this view, identity unwinds from the spool of continuous experience, with autobiographical memory as its most obvious manifestation.

John Locke (1690/2009), generally considered the progenitor of this view, provides the following thought experiment: "Should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler everyone sees he [the cobbler] would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions" (Book II, Ch. 27, Sec. 15). *Everyone sees* this, he says: It is not only self-evident, but a view widely shared. This is a common rhetorical device in philosophy. The problem is, when phrased this way—as a matter of universally held human intuition—the claim ceases being only a metaphysical one and becomes a scientific one as well. Is this really how the typical person understands identity?

Not one to sit out on the important debates, William James (1891) arrived at a similar conclusion: "If a man wakes up one fine day unable to recall any of his past experiences, so that he has to learn his biography afresh he feels, and he says, that he is a changed person" (p. 336). A century later, the neurologist Oliver Sacks (1985) ponders this question when documenting a patient with Korsakov's syndrome. The man's amnesia was so severe that he had lost not only his entire past life but also his ability to add new memories. He was bereft of any narrative structure to hold the arc of his existence together. "One tended to speak of him, instinctively, as a spiritual casualty—a 'lost soul': was it possible that he had been 'de-souled' by a disease?" (p. 37).[1] To rob someone of his memories is to snuff out his personhood, indeed his very existence. Less grandiose versions of this idea show up in modern psychology, in the form of theories that identity emerges from a complex interplay between narrative structure and disposition (McAdams & Manczak, 2015).

Meanwhile, the past century of social psychology has been grappling with a very different notion of personal identity, one that understands it in contrast with the group (Festinger, 1954; Erikson, 1959; Diener, 1979; Brewer, 1991). Whereas group identity consists of the properties that bind us to others, individual identity is what sets us apart: our unique set of hobbies, preferences, quirks, and dispositions. What makes you you is what allows you to be picked out of the crowd (Nelson & Miller, 1995; Vignoles, Chryssochoou, & Breakwell, 2000; Blanton & Christie, 2003). This view is nicely captured by the old *Far Side* cartoon where a penguin stands in a sea of indistinguishable penguins, belting out "I just gotta be me-ee-eee!" For humans, to be robbed of individuating characteristics is to be thrown into an unmitigated identity disaster (Erikson, 1959).

The idea that morality might be at the heart of personal identity is both new and profoundly ancient. Hints of it permeate everyday thinking under a variety of guises. Perhaps the most compelling of these is how various religious traditions characterize the self. In Abrahamic religions, the pith of the self is commonly known as the soul. The soul is the immaterial, eternal essence of a person that survives the body after death and lends each person their unique identity. It also happens to be the seat of the moral conscience. (In an old episode of *The Simpsons,* Bart sells his soul for $5. He soon discovers that automatic doors fail to open for him, jokes no longer elicit mirth, and pets recoil at his touch, as if he were a monster.) Certain Eastern religions (such as Hinduism and Jainism) have a similar concept, the atman. The atman represents the true self of a person, in spiritual form. It is not just any part of a person's essence, but their moral center especially. The atman is the part of the self that gets reincarnated from one life to the next. Personal enlightenment determines whether the atman will be reincarnated into something great, like a goddess, or something punitive, like a slug. The atman

is thus strongly associated with moral and spiritual wisdom.

When social psychologists first began looking at person perception several decades ago, they noticed a curious pattern. The most salient properties of a person—the ones that leave the strongest impression on observers—are those that relate to interpersonal warmth (Anderson, 1968; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). More detailed analyses reveal that, within the wide umbrella of warmth traits (a category that includes sense of humor and extroversion), it is moral traits, like honesty and compassion, that are pulling most of that weight (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014).

Of course, what makes us like someone is not interchangeable with diachronic identity and need not draw on the same set of personal features. Likewise, cross-cultural religious texts offer only the broadest insinuations about folk intuitions of identity. Ultimately, we must turn to direct empirical evidence.

A Brief Detour: Essentialism

Before continuing, it is worth taking a moment to consider the cognitive mechanism that allows us to make sense of identity transformations in the first place: essentialism.

Psychological essentialism refers to the tendency to infer underlying, often hidden, properties in an object that explain its behavior and confer its underlying nature or "essence" (Medin & Ortony, 1989; Gelman, 2003). Although essentialism was originally used to explain how people reason about natural kinds (Keil, 1989; Gelman & Wellman, 1991), it permeates reasoning about social categories (Taylor, 1996; Hirschfeld, 1995), artifacts (Newman, Diesendruck, & Bloom, 2011), and personality (Haslam, Bastian, & Bissett, 2004). Essentialism is what explains our ability to see that an ugly duckling and the swan it turns into are the same individual.

As it is with cygnets, so it is with humans. Persons seem to have an essence that endures across time and physical changes. We consider baby Nina Strohminger to be the same as adult Nina Strohminger, even though she looks quite different and is not even made of the same cellular matter (Buchholz, Druid, & Frisén, 2005). And while the bloated Elvis of the 1970s bore little resemblance to the dreamboat Elvis of 20 years prior, we perceive them to be the same person, in a way that even the most uncanny Elvis impersonator can't match (Sternberg, Chawarski, & Allbritton, 1998). The persisting essence of persons underlies the superstition that the psychological traits of organ donors can manifest in transplant recipients (Sylvia & Novak, 1997; Inspector, Kutz, & David, 2004; Meyer, Leslie, Gelman, & Stilwell, 2013) and seeps into beliefs about how souls are reincarnated into new bodies (Bloom & Gelman, 2008).

The principle of psychological essentialism, therefore, yields two important points. It shows that we can perceive underlying constancy in spite of apparent change, and it suggests a mechanism for doing so (i.e., by positing an underlying essence). Further, if psychological essentialism is applied to individual persons, this suggests that some personal traits will be treated as identity conferring, whereas others will be more ancillary.

Some Empirical Evidence

One way of getting at folk conceptions of identity is to plumb folk intuitions about the soul. As noted above, the Western notion of the soul represents a kind of placeholder for the concept of the self. When asked about which traits would transfer when a soul switches bodies, participants rank moral traits as more likely to survive the transition than memories or individuating preferences like musical taste and career ambitions, as well as other mental and physical features (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). Similarly, when asked about which traits would be reincarnated into the next life, participants select moral traits (like honesty, trustworthiness, and generosity) more often than personality traits (like intelligence, sense of humor, and creativity; Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). This effect holds cross-culturally. When Hindu Indians are asked which traits would transfer with the soul, they consistently rate moral traits more like-

ly than other mental traits (Garfield, Nichols, Rai, & Strohminger, 2015; Nichols, Strohminger, Rai, & Garfield, 2016). Even Buddhist Tibetans, who expressly deny the existence of the self or atman, believe that moral traits are most likely to survive a soul switch. And while there are some systematic cross-cultural differences in characterizing the underlying self, the belief that it is fundamentally moral appears to be cross-culturally robust (Kung, Eibach, & Grossman, 2016; De Freitas et al., in press).

Nor is this intuition limited to religious beliefs about the nature of the soul. When asked how different someone would be if they took a pill that altered one of a variety of mental traits—memories, personality, preferences, perceptual abilities, and so on—participants responded that a person would be the most fundamentally changed if he or she took a drug that altered moral traits or behaviors, such as a pill that cured psychopathy or made someone into a thief (Strohminger & Nichols, 2014). This judgment is just as true for assessments of one's own identity as it is for that of others (Heiphetz, Strohminger, & Young, 2017). The privileging of moral traits emerges in childhood. Eight- to 10-year-olds report that a person would be most radically changed if they took a pill that altered universally held moral beliefs than other sorts of beliefs or preferences (Heiphetz, Strohminger, Young, & Gelman, 2016). Morality is not only central to identity; it is also seen as the most causally central feature of the mind (Chen, Urminsky, & Bartels, 2016). This is consistent with the more general rule that the essential properties of a concept tend to be causally central (Sloman, Love, & Ahn, 1998).

Nowhere is the evidence for the moral self more unequivocal than in actual cases of psychological change. Strohminger and Nichols (2015) surveyed family members of people with different forms of neurodegenerative disease, asking them questions about identity change across the disease progression—for instance, whether the patient ever seems like a stranger to them, or whether the patient seems like a fundamentally changed person. They found that patients whose principal symptoms are moral impairment (from frontotemporal dementia) are seen as having a more altered identity than those with Alzheimer's, whose impairments are primarily memory-based; both result in more perceived identity change than amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), a neurodegenerative disease whose symptoms are primarily motor and noncognitive. Not only that, but deterioration of the moral faculty across all three of these diseases was nearly the only impairment that altered perceived identity. Even in real cases of psychological change, morality has a singular impact on perceived identity continuity.

There is a twist here. Diachronic identity is not simply *moral,* but appears to be especially biased toward the morally *good* (Newman, Knobe, & Bloom, 2014; Strohminger, Newman, & Knobe, in press). For example, Tobia (2016) finds that a Phineas Gage-type person is seen as more radically transformed when an accident robs him of a moral compass than when it bequeaths him with one. People seem to incorporate this into their naive beliefs about how personal growth happens over the lifespan. Whereas negative moral changes give rise to a dramatic identity rupture, positive changes are seen as merely revealing an underlying capacity that was there all along (Molouki & Bartels, 2017). Perhaps this is why improvements to the self are so often seen as "discoveries" (Schlegel, Vess, & Arndt, 2012).

Some Certain Uncertainties

Earlier, we stated that essentialism is what allows us to perceive stasis in the face of change. But when the sense of diachronic identity breaks—most often, and most easily, when moral features change—very little is known about this mechanism. One possibility is that, in determining what matters for the identity of others, people draw on what they personally value most. This account would be consistent with the more general tendency to project internal knowledge onto external targets, such as the false consensus effect (Krueger & Clement, 1994). A projective account is supported by the finding that individuals scoring high in psychopathy weight morality less heavily when judging identity in others. (I will note that, as the author of many of the studies cited in this chapter, this is the only time I

have ever failed to find the moral self effect; Strohminger & Nichols, 2016.)

The astute reader will rightly observe that there is a difference between how a person experiences their own sense of identity and how they perceive the identity of others. And while studies find that people report that moral changes would affect their own identity more than other types of mental change (Heiphetz et al., in press), one could further level the charge that what one predicts would happen need not reflect what one would actually experience.[2] This poses both a practical and a logical challenge for the experimentalist. It may well be the case that a sudden, complete loss of autobiographical memories would lead a person to feel so unmoored they would report being completely different from their previous self, as William James (1891) surmised. But this may be difficult to measure, given that a judgment of whether one has changed must inevitably be based on the memory of what has been lost. It doesn't help that anosognosia (a lack of awareness of one's illness) is comorbid with many brain diseases (Prigatano & Schacter, 1991). Another factor may be the severity of the deficit—perhaps a mild or moderate memory lapse does not change experienced identity continuity, but a total disappearance does (Eustache et al., 2013). This would explain the inconsistency of the studies that have attempted to answer this question (Klein, Cosmides, & Costabile, 2003; Rose Addis & Tippett, 2004; Duval et al., 2012; Levitin, 2012). More work will be required to disentangle these possibilities.

Some Expansions

The basic finding that diachronic identity is essentially moral has several broader implications. It has long been recognized that the more central morality is to one's sense of identity, the more morally one behaves (Blasi, 1983; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009; Monin & Jordan, 2009). This suggests that self-identity is a driving force in regulating moral behavior, along with moral reasoning and emotions. Given that we think of other selves as good deep down, this could be a valuable tool in mitigating intergroup conflict (De Freitas & Cikara, 2016). Identity change in dementia patients—largely brought on by moral degeneration—predicts relationship deterioration between caregiver and patient (Strohminger & Nichols, 2015). Unfortunately, the flip side of this is that people also report an unwillingness to take psychopharmaceuticals to cure moral deficits because of a reluctance to interfere with the innermost parts of the self (Riis, Simmons, & Goodwin, 2008). Finally, in an odd phenomenon that seems to reflect the tendency of humans to anthropomorphize with reckless abandon, even corporate identity appears to be essentially moral, with corporate integrity edging out other factors such as product quality and profits (Strohminger, Pizarro, & Ariely, 2017). Such findings may ultimately bear on legal issues relating to corporate personhood and corporate social responsibility.

There is, however, a deeper intellectual puzzle here. We have shown that morality plays the most powerful role in shaping judgments of diachronic identity. The evidence for this conclusion is overwhelming, and the effect is remarkably robust across contexts and testing procedures. The centrality of morality even shades into other, related concepts, like impression formation and personhood. A natural question to ask at this juncture is, *Why*? Why does morality appear at this nexus, again and again, no matter how we slice it?

To answer this question, it may be helpful to step back and consider the reason people keep track of persons in the first place. Few animals, it turns out, have individual recognition for conspecifics in the way that humans do. Those that do all have something in common: They are social (Tibbetts & Dale, 2007; Sheehan & Tibbetts, 2011). They rely on one another to survive.

Evolutionary biologists have pointed out that, in order for the building blocks of morality to emerge, animals must be able to keep track of individuals in the environment (Nowak, 2006). Reciprocal altruism requires that agents keep tabs on who has helped in the past, in order to know whom to help in the future (Trivers, 1971). Likewise, the most effective cooperation strategy requires that one keep track of offenders in

order to punish them in future interactions (Axelrod, 1980).

Indeed, the whole reason that Locke and other enlightenment philosophers were so concerned with personal identity in the first place was that they recognized it to be a forensic concept, foundational to any coherent theory of personal responsibility (Locke, 1690/2009; Hume, 1739/2003; Reid, 1785/1850). If a person's identity is ever-changing, how can we hold them accountable for the deeds of their past self?

So perhaps this puzzle has been arranged backward. It is not that morality is central to diachronic identity. Rather, it's that identity is a cog within the larger machinery of the moral cognitive system. What we 're doing when we're trying to figure out who someone is "deep down," or when we're trying to pin down their essence, is to determine what they'll be like as a social partner—whether they'll cheat or be nice, help us or hurt us. We really want to know what kind of moral being they are. And maybe this is what personal identity is all about.

A Certain Irony

Embedded within this conclusion is a certain understated irony. Diachronic identity is not chiefly about identification. It is not even about *differentiation*. Nearly everyone has empathy, yet this is more important to identity than distinctive traits like one's appearance or talents or musical preferences.

Our understanding of a person's identity has much more to do with how this individual will operate within the larger group. What they'll be like to cooperate with. What they'll be like as romantic partners. As business partners. Identity is about fitting in, not standing out.

We are such social creatures that even that most autonomous concept—the individual person—still ultimately reflects our dependence on others.

NOTES

1. Sacks's case study has a twist ending, one that is consistent with the thesis of the present chapter. The curious reader is encouraged to read his essay in full.
2. Prevailing evidence suggests that future and past selves are treated as friendly strangers, rather than as numerically identical with the present self (Bartels & Rips, 2010). Perhaps the hypothetical self works the same way.

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