

Personal and Moral Selfhood

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ABSTRACT. Moral conceptions of personhood seem liable to different, more or less interesting, interpretations. This paper argues that on more interesting interpretations, the moral self is not so much identical with personhood, but more a significant feature or dimension of it. In general, the paper sets out to identify and evaluate the relative merits of very diverse conceptions of the relationship of person to moral agency in the major traditions of moral theory. In particular, however, the paper argues that a broadly naturalistic virtue ethics promises to give a better account of the relationship of personhood to morality than its deontological, utilitarian and communitarian rivals.

KEYWORDS: communitarianism, Kantian (ethics), moral agency, person, self, utilitarianism, virtue (ethics)

1. Persons and identity

Questions concerning the nature of personhood have ever been high on the agenda of philosophers. However, some shift in thinking about personhood has been evident of late in a certain fashion for talk of the *moral* self. A likely reason for this trend is the thought that moral actions and narratives cannot but play a constitutive role in determining personal continuity – if, indeed, we can make *any* sense of personhood apart from ideas of continuous moral agency. Thus, other personal qualities notwithstanding, it is tempting to think there could hardly be more to personal integrity than what is provided in moral narrative – construed as fidelity or otherwise of moral principles or values. From this viewpoint, as we shall shortly see, there can be no doubt that many modern philosophers have been inclined to a very close identification or association of the personal and the moral (see, for example, Taylor, 1989). That said, it would also appear that different philosophers have conceived this connection in rather diverse – more and less plausible – ways. Hence, although I shall proceed to argue that there is much to the contemporary intuition that moral

qualities and characteristics are key constituents or determinants of personhood, we shall need to look critically at rather different current versions of this idea.

First, we need to recognise that there are more and less interesting ways of establishing this connection. One less than helpful way would amount to little more than stipulative definition. Thus, someone who doubts the connection between personal and moral selfhood might point out that there are some who we have no trouble regarding as persons – the immoral or amoral – even though they do not appear to be moved by any sort of moral considerations. What, then, is wrong with supposing that there are persons – the Paul Gauguins or Oscar Wildes of this world – whose lives are governed by aesthetic criteria or values which they are quite prepared to put before moral considerations and loyalties? The philosophically un-illuminating response here would insist that the criteria to which we mainly appeal in characterising such individuals as persons are nevertheless mainly *moral*. Since amorality and immorality are themselves moral categories, our personal appraisals of such agents are still liable to refer to their observance or otherwise of moral principles or values. I think that this is indisputably so – not least in connection with those who, like Wilde and Gauguin, were clearly moral in some aspects of their lives, immoral in others, as well as moral agents in all aspects of their lives – which can only mean any and every human agent. However, it should also be clear that any such truth is merely *trivial*, and that this commonplace misses some respects of real practical human significance in which our talk of moral and personal selfhood can come apart.

Indeed, some of these respects have found expression in classical and modern fictional literature. R.L. Stevenson's familiar fable 'Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' addresses the time-honoured problem of accounting for the conflicted coexistence of good and evil – which sometimes actually seems to reach psychiatric breaking point in cases of split or multiple personality – in most if not all human personalities. If we ask whether Jekyll and Hyde (or actual subjects of split personality), are the *same* or *different* people, we may say that they are the same insofar there is a continuous narrative of Jekyll-Hyde, but different insofar as we encounter quite distinct moral characters at different times of day or night. Again, take those modern works of

fiction which experiment with different conclusions – tracking the alternative developmental possibilities of this or that character – which again reflect our ordinary concerns with what people might in different circumstances have become. Thus, in this ending, the hero becomes a saint, in that ending a serial killer – yet both of these are but possible futures of the little boy who fell out of the apple tree in chapter one. In view of such reflections, should the saint and the serial killer be considered the same person or different people?

There is also a strong philosophical inclination to think that there must be *one* definitive answer to this question – especially if we are to believe that there is to be such a thing as *real* human personality. One enduring temptation, of course, is to suppose that ordinary criteria of material and/or spatio-temporal continuity might settle such questions. First, since Jekyll and Hyde ‘inhabit’ the same body across the same spatio-temporal trajectory – how can they fail to be the same person? Second, since the might-have-been saint merely represents an imagined alternative to the real biography of this actual serial killer, we can give little real sense to any question about whether the latter is the same person as the former. But this is too quick – and seems to rest on a mistake. There may be no real question about the identity of the saint and the serial killer, but there seems to be a very real question about whether the serial killer is the same person as the boy who fell out the apple tree – to which the only reasonable response seems to be both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. The obvious trouble is that whereas ordinary criteria of spatio-temporal (physical) continuity track only the material or biological integrity of a human being, selves or persons are *not* biologically individuated entities.

First, it does not seem strictly *sufficient* for personhood to be (merely) a human being, since there are arguably some human beings – small infants, those on terminal life support and perhaps the incurably and criminally insane – who we do not regard (at least in any robust sense) as persons. Secondly, it is not obviously *necessary* to be human in order to be a person – since deities and divinities are, and extra-terrestrials could be, regarded as persons despite possessing no human biological characteristics. In short, the idea of a person is – like the related notion of citizenship – a *normative* more than a biological concept. From this viewpoint, becoming a person is a matter of

gradual initiation into and participation in a range and diversity of social institutions and practices. But, of course, since this is not an all-or-nothing or once-and-always affair, the different levels of normative engagement of persons give rise to that inevitable relativity to which our individuations of self and others are prone. Is X the same person as Y? In what way do you mean? He is certainly the same person as the boy who fell out of the apple tree or trained as a priest twenty years ago. In another respect, however, the serial killer is clearly quite a different or changed person from the dedicated missionary to the poor of all those years ago. However, since some experiences change us more than others, and may serve more radically than others to dissociate us from what we were, there may be no once-and-for-all answer to any question about whether we are now who we once were. Questions of same or different personhood are inherently *relative*: we must always ask of any question concerning the sameness of persons – ‘same in what respect?’

But does this mean that there is no real or unique individual human self? Again, it is not easy to give a straight answer to this question without further clarification or disambiguation. To be sure, the fact that the serial killer is in this but not that sense the person he once was does not prevent him from being the *unique* person he is now – a vicious killer who was once a gentle priest. However, what probably lies behind the question about the real self is the thought that, given the Jekyll and Hyde nature of most of us, one aspect of ourselves might yet be more significantly indicative of our selfhood than others. When we face, as it were, the final curtain – will the Jekyll in us be saved and the Hyde redeemed, or will the Hyde be damned and the Jekyll along with it? In short, it is tempting to suppose that behind the apparently inextricable tangle of the good, the bad and the ugly that most of us seem to be, there is nevertheless a solid core of personal integrity or virtue which constitutes a *genuine* self. Moreover, although I suppose there is also nothing to prevent some individuals taking pride in the irretrievable wickedness of their damned souls, it is likely that most people would wish to identify their best moral nature with this innermost core – that part of them which would persuade St. Peter to open wide the gates of heaven and let them in. Indeed, do we not often seek to convince ourselves that although what

we just did was beastly and cruel – it was nevertheless out of character, not really us, to behave in such a way?

In short, if there is a case for regarding some of the respects in which we are apt for normative assessment (as good citizens, loyal servants, skilled pianists or whatever) as more significant, or truly us, than others – it may seem to be strongest in relation to qualities of moral integrity or character. From this viewpoint, moreover, any identification of personhood with the moral self would not be merely trivial: it would not just be that *any* characterisation of persons could hardly avoid normative reference to their moral status. It would be rather that although there are other senses in which human agents may be regarded as persons, the most *significant* sense in which they are persons is that in which they are moral agents. The idea would be that although I might be aptly (personally) evaluated as a good pianist or as someone who adores his children, these are merely contingent facts about me – whereas my moral integrity or unreliability are necessary features of a *real* me. In essence, this expresses the position of arguably the most powerful and influential moral theory of modern times – that of the great eighteenth century metaphysician Immanuel Kant.

2. Kant's 'noumenal' moral self

The early modern empirical science of Galileo, Newton and others was built upon a key distinction between what is objectively observable and the subjective observer – between a hard reality external to the senses and the conscious fleeting impressions of that reality – to which Rene Descartes responded by taking the self out of the world. For Descartes (see Anscombe and Geach, 1954), the 'I' of self-reference refers not to any embodied empirical self of ordinary interpersonal association, but to subjective human experience or consciousness. However, as the source of rationally demonstrable knowledge – of the reality of the soul and the existence of God – the subjective Cartesian self or soul has an ontological status and significance which is denied to the objects of empirical observation. But a rather different spin is put on Descartes' separation of consciousness from world, and on his identification of self with consciousness, by the

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