

Self-Identity and Moral Maturity

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For developmental researchers of all disciplines, 'internalization' is the central issue for understanding morality.

Robert Emde (1988, p. 33).

ABSTRACT. The central discussion is about how a person grows into a mature moral being only to the extent that certain aspects of his general sense of self have developed first. Most importantly, I argue that the process of *psychological identification* that is so central in adult self identity formation is also the linchpin in coming to moral maturity; that is, that moral maturity presupposes that a person is already what I call a 'full identificatory self'. I begin the discussion in section 1 by drawing a general picture of psychological development, starting from the most rudimentary attachment hunger (but relative agency poverty) of infancy to the more independent agency (yet continuing attachment hunger) of adulthood. I point out the importance that psychological identification has in this lifelong march toward independent agency. We see identification as the process of taking a valuational ownership of one's developing character states, that being the central process in becoming an agency self. In section 2, I discuss how a person's sensing of his self identity (i.e., his unfolding capacity for identification) is captured quite nicely by Bernard Williams discussion of 'the personal point of view' that a person brings to his central life projects and concerns. I suggest that Williams mistakenly thinks the personal point of view to be crucial to one's *moral* identity. In fact, it is at the heart of one's broader *self* identity – at the heart of one's general capacity to identify. In section 3, I argue for the central thesis that moral maturity presupposes that a person *identify with the moral* perspective. A person who merely acts by moral dictates but doesn't bring her full self identificatory capacities to bear on these actions is not a morally autonomous and mature individual. In sections 4 and 5, I compare my notion of moral development with competing theories. I also tackle the question of why persons identify at all with the moral life.

KEY WORDS: moral development, moral identification, psychological development, psychological identification, self-identity

In this paper, I am going to explore the relationship between self-identity development and moral development. No small matter, that. Among other things, one can't help but be impressed by the wide range of moral development theories out there in the literature: Piaget, Kohlberg, Gilligan, Tonnies, Waterman, Mead, Bandura – to name a few. In fact, one really needs a scorecard to keep track of all the players. Frankly, evaluating and choosing among these theorists and their theories is beyond what I want to discuss. Although I will finally share with you some thoughts I have about how moral developmental timetables get conditioned by self-development, my focus really is to explain how a person grows into a mature moral being only to the extent that certain aspects of his general sense of self have developed first. Most importantly, I'll argue for the thesis that the process of *psychological identification* that is so central in adult self-identity formation is also the linchpin in coming to moral maturity; that is, that moral maturity presupposes that a person is already what I call a 'full identificatory self'. In the course of this discussion, I will point to some interesting consequences for understanding the roles that autonomy and integrity play in both self- and moral development. We will begin, however, by briefly laying some preliminary groundwork in sections 1 and 2.

1. Identification, psychological ownership, and autonomy

First I will say some very general things about self(-identity)-development. The concept means different things to different people. In wearing two hats – a philosopher's and a psychoanalyst's – I have my own special take on the matter. What I have in mind is the growth of a person's self-identity into independent agency. It is a gradual journey she takes from first having no internal agency during infancy to finally having a sense of being a relatively internalised agency self in adulthood. Starting out as a creature of wants and needs for things like food, warmth, general biological comfort and attachment, the infant is at best a self that depends *directly* on the agency assistance of caretaker *others* to get her wants and needs met. Psychoanalysts recognise that the infant/very young child eventually turns to non-

intentionally making use of various psychological mechanisms of real or imagined relating to others (what is referred to as 'object relations') in order to more *indirectly* enlist their agency powers to get her wants and needs satisfied. She 'borrows' the agency of others (*as if* it were her own) through the object relating processes of incorporation, introjection, projection, imitation, projective identification, and more. In time, however, a primitive *genuine internal* agency self begins developing, albeit it is a fledgling self that, for a while, depends on the affirmation of its embryonic agency powers from its caretaker 'object' others. These others encourage and esteem the infant's sense of grandiose entitlement to both its wants and its newly unfolding values. They promote forays by the infant/young child into experiments with self agency control over meeting these entitlements.

That's a big picture of the very beginning of matters for a person's journey of self-development. There obviously are many more complex twists and turns one makes before reaching *full* self-development. But as it is only the end process of this journey that is crucial for *our* discussion, I will turn our attention now to it. That would be the role that *psychological identification* plays in a person's securing a full sense of self-identity. I am going to provide only a sketch here of what this is about – a simple definition, really, of the concept.

In advanced self-development, a person starts taking *psychological ownership* of the internal agency self that has slowly been moulding. She takes ownership, that is, of certain features of her self that are now under her internal agency power. We say that she has begun to *identify with* various features of life *as being* herself, under the power of her internal agency. In this way, she is coming by an intentional sense of self-identity. The scope of the 'various features' of this blossoming sense of an owned self is wide ranging. A person can identify, for example, with aspects of humanity, gender, body, central psychological states, family, profession, moral persuasion, political party and social values. When people engage in identification, they experience the things they identify with as being part of who they *are* and under the power of their internal agency. Were someone to challenge the integrity of any such identified-with features a person has, that person would feel that her self had been assaulted. Maintain-

ing the integrity of any of these features is very important because that is tantamount to maintaining her existence as an identificatory self. This new sense of self is maintained at virtually all costs because, as it is the ultimate developmental endpoint of being a self, the identificatory self is of supreme value to the individual.

This idea of the self's 'supreme value' really has to do with the central psychological mechanism involved in identification. That is the act of *identificatory valuation*: when we have identified with something, we have *posited total value* in it. We have as much as said that it is now experienced as being a defining aspect of the item of greatest value for us – viz., our self. And so of course it is proudly displayed to the world and defended when need be. These identificatory valuations define who we are. They are ideal images of how we think our life should be¹ – a kind of reflexively generated imago to supplement the one that we have only been 'borrowing' until now from the caretaker other. We commonly refer to them as our 'personal values' or our 'character values'.

The positing of these identificatory valuations is an *autonomous* act. To identify with various features of the world is to autonomously choose to see ourselves in particular ways that are (seen as) of highest value, as well as to autonomously choose to take responsibility for consistently agentially maintaining those ways of being. These features are not valuable to us because we have appealed to some independent naturalistic list of what's valuable in life. Rather, we have autonomously *created* the list through our choosing of those parts of who we are to be. In the existential vernacular, we have *chosen* ourselves *into existence*. In this vein, to be a being that identifies with things in the world *is* to be an autonomous being.

One last point about identificatory valuations. They are divided into two kinds: personal valuations and social valuations. To develop the first is to begin carving out a sense of being a personal identity, a

¹ Certainly all of this has a familiar Aristotelian ring to it: viz., that there is something so very *right* about a person's living through her character, through the values that define her self. But the ideas that I am discussing here are not about Aristotle's concerns with morality and right action. They are about the broader question of what it takes to be an identity self *per se*.

sense that one is a unique individual, distinct from all others. To develop the second is to anchor a sense of being a social identity, a sense that one is sharing various essential self-features with specified others. To express either of these kinds of identity in our daily behaviour and mentation is to reaffirm to both ourselves and the world exactly who we are.

Clearly, these claims about the identificatory self are philosophically dense and contentious, and consequently in need of much discussion and defence. But I won't engage in any more of that here. I simply have wanted to *state* these ideas as my view of what the developmentally more mature self is like and then move on to make use of them. The point is, when we talk about a person's sense of self-identity, we are talking about her sense of what she psychologically owns, about what she senses of herself to be under her internal agency control. In short, her sense of self-identity is her awareness of what she identifies with. *Who she is in her fullest psychological self-development is largely the sum of what she identifies with.*

2. Self-identity, integrity, and the personal point of view

A second preliminary matter we need to deal with before getting to the central thesis of this paper involves us in a particular moral philosophy debate. On one side of the debate, we have those people (e.g., utilitarians) who insist that all moral decision-making be done from a decidedly *impersonal* principled point of view and that any thinking stemming from a *personal* point of view is inherently non-moral. On the other side, we have people such as Bernard Williams who deny this. For my part, I believe that the exclusion of the personal point of view from the moral life (i.e., the first position in this debate) is a mistake, and that to understand this mistake for what it is, we can at the same time begin to appreciate more about the rich texture of moral development and its ultimate dependence upon self-identity development. Let's see why.

According to Williams, a central problem with utilitarianism is that it disregards the essential nature of a person – most notably, a person's concerns for his own personal projects (Smart and Williams,

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