**Moral Self-Identity**

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Abstract

There has been a discernible movement, in both ethical theory and moral developmental psychology to draw a tighter connection between moral agency and personality. At least among psychologists the desire for thicker conceptions of the moral self is motivated partly by a desire to offer a compelling account of the relationship between moral judgment and moral action. After all, knowing the right thing to do, and doing it, are very different matters. On the account favored by Augusto Blasi (and following Harry Frankfurt and Charles Taylor) a person is more likely to follow through on what moral duty requires if the very self is constructed on moral foundations, that is, to the extent that one identifies with morality and cares about it as a second-order desire. Moral identity is marked by *second-order volitions* (Frankfurt) and *strong evaluation* (Taylor). It cuts to the core of who we claim ourselves to be and is *essential, central* and *important* to self-identity. The desire to keep faith with the very grounds of self-understanding is the source of moral motivation. But not everyone builds the self around moral commitments but on other priorities, in which case moral identity is a dimension of individual differences, which is to say, a way of talking about personality.

In my remarks I review *moral centrality* and *chronic accessibility* approaches to understanding moral self-identity. Both approaches trade on social cognitive personality theory that draws attention to cognitive schemas that influence social perception and creates and sustains patterns of individual differences. On this view if schemas are easily primed and readily activated (“chronically accessible”) then attention is directed selectively to certain features of our experience at the expense of others. This selective framing disposes one to select schema-compatible tasks, goals and settings that canalize our dispositional tendencies. A moral person, or a person who has a moral identity or character, is one for whom moral categories are chronically active and readily accessible in memory. Chronically accessible moral schemas provide a dispositional readiness to discern the moral dimensions of experience, as well as to underwrite the discriminative facility in selecting situation-appropriate behavior. But situations are important. Situations that prime or activate the accessibility of moral identity strengthens the motivation to act morally. Situational factors that decrease accessibility weakens moral motivation. I will attempt to flesh this out with examples from the empirical literature.

In sum, I will build a case for the following claims: Moral identity reflects the importance of what we care about. A moral person engages in strong evaluation. But this depends upon the accessibility of moral identity, which is a dimension of individual differences; and the centrality of moral identity in working memory. Moral identity must be central and accessible to guide moral behavior, but can be activated or deactivated by situational press.