New Ethics' Transcendence of the Illusion of Personal Identity

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Abstract

As the humanity was entering modern times, the notion of personal identity came into the limelight among many philosophers, giving rise to a range of related theories and concepts. Of them, the skepticism about personal identity advanced by David Hume is still sending us an important message. Dealing with the notion of personal identity, he introduced the three relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation, but renounced them as having any objective basis from which to develop them into viable principles for explaining our notions of personal identity. However, in dealing with the problem of personal identity, consistency of standards is more important than their objectivity, and the difficulties facing the humanity providing accurate answers to compelling questions such as those about the self and death are basically ascribable to our failure to provide consistent standards. Applying a consistent standard, it becomes clear that non-identity among others and personal identity are incompatible, and this points to the need for a shift of perspective in ethics. This paper concludes that the relations among humans and many different points in time within a self are fundamentally the same, and going one step further, intends to set up a new framework of ethics including a concept of the universal effect of existence.

Categories: Ethics, Epistemology, Ontology, Philosophy, Psychology

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1. Of Hume's skepticism

As humans, we feel that personal identity persists throughout our lives and that this same invariable self remains solely attributable to ourselves until our death. This notion of the self is a firmly established view from time immemorial, although it has moved toward center stage as we were entering the modern times. As Anthony Taylor wrote in 1989, it feels as if there is "something like an a priori unity of a human life through its whole extent" (Taylor 1989). Near the end of the 19th century, David Hume declared the following in *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. (Hume 1896)

Hume regards the concept of personal identity as being dependent on the relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation and argues that these relations drive us to put forward our notions of personal identity with the "smooth and uninterrupted" progress. He also notes that although we can commonly distinguish clearly between numerical identity and specific identity, we occasionally confound them and that the same confusion affects the question of personal identity. When a building is demolished and rebuilt in the same shape, there is only a "specific identity or resemblance" between the old and new buildings, and there is nothing numerically the same. However, Hume goes on to say, because the old building was demolished before the new building came into existence, we call them the same without scruples instead of coming around to the idea of multiplicity within any one point of time (Hume 1896).

Furthermore, we tend to maintain our notion of identity more easily when a change occurs to the object of our thought in a fairly anticipated manner, rather than suddenly, because the continuity of our thought is less interrupted (Hume 1896). These tendencies of our mind are closely associated with the aforementioned relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation. However, as Hume mentioned in the appendix to the book, human propensity to form the notion of personal identity does not involve the three relations mentioned above, but a mature awareness of the behavior itself to derive the identity of an object through these relations and, furthermore, the trust in this awareness. In other words, Hume had little choice but to admit that the formation of the notion of personal identity is for the greatest part attributable to our consciousness. Yet, he could not reconcile himself with the conclusion drawn by human consciousness, "*There are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them viz, that all our distinct existence and that of the mind never perceives any real connection*" (Hume 1896).

As examined above, Hume opines that although the human mind gives rise to the notion of personal identity, it is not because the mind can conceive of a real connection between the perceptions of the multiple points within a self. Hume's conviction is grounded on his reasoning,

by way of example, that the human faculty of memory, which has a determinant influence on the question of personal identity and causes many people to err in that matter, include all events in the past, even the ones of which only impressions remain, in the realm of personal identity. This phenomenon of confusing memory and imagination proves that the faculty of memory cannot serve as an objective basis for establishing the notion of personal identity, and Hume simply figured it out.

All discussions about objective principles inevitably resort to the three relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation as principles of union among ideas, as proposed by Hume at the outset. Thus, Hume regards this problem as a simple matter of grammatical clarification rather than philosophical reasoning.

However, I oppose this view. Strictly speaking, the question of personal identity can be solved through objective reasoning, and it is a problem that needs solving. Ethics should no longer be rambling on the forked road of deontology (morality based on ideas of “right” and “wrong”) and utilitarianism (considering all actions are “right” if they somehow benefit a common cause). These concepts, deontology and utilitarianism, conflict with and contradict one another, and this conflict and contradiction must be resolved to birth a new paradigm built on the solid foundation of rigorous epistemology and ontology.

2. Two contradictory notions

The opinion that a subjective standard inevitably affects the process of determining the identity of the objects in question holds a certain logic, as it should be admitted that the process of deriving the identity of objects through the relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation has not always been objective. However, putting aside the subjectivity problem of the standard for determining the identity of objects, if they were at least consistent, our consciousness would not have denied the identity of interindividual relations and taken the identity of various intraindividual events over time (past, present, or future) for granted. As Hume points out, the mind, at least the objective mind, finds no evidence that can justify the conviction that all the bundles of the perceptions constituting the self have the same identity. In this situation, a parallel can be drawn between the relations among multiple others and those among many different points within the self. Nevertheless, the “I” in the past is considered to have been replaced by the “I” at the present, which beguiles the mind to derive the same identity from the past and present “I.” In contrast, the lives of others persist even amidst the existence of the life of “I,” thus gaining the title of being non-identical and distinct entities. As mentioned above, this is just a customary tendency of our mind, and has nothing to do with objective truth, given that the standard for determining the identity of two objects cannot vary depending on persistence or disappearance of one of the two objects.

Prior to discussing the question of whether the standard for determining the personal identity is subjective or objective, there must at least be a consistent standard. Nevertheless, this

customary tendency can easily cause our mind to make mistakes, and two conflicting notions arise: others as distinct (non-identical) from the self and a single self that is identical over time. It is of crucial importance to resolve the conflict and contradiction between these two notions, and resolving this problem is, in turn, vital to preparing the foundation for the emergence of a new paradigm of ethics.

3. The ontology embedded in the new ethics

The solution to this contradiction is surprisingly simple: unifying the relationships between “the self” and “others” and those among the different points within the self. If the various points within the self have the same identity, that is, if the life of “I” is composed of the self that is identical over time, then others’ lives are considered to have the same essence as the identity and life of “I”. The opposite view may also be adopted: the relations among various points within the self are thoroughly “shredded”, and the self of “I” is nothing but a collection of different impressions and perceptions. From this point of view, of course, the lives and minds of others are maintained at the level of non-identical relations from the self of “I”. Which of these two viewpoints should we choose? Curiously, this question is also linked to the question, “Is morality an intrinsic or artificial virtue?” Our ancestors tried to explain the natural phenomena that had remained unsolved until modern times by introducing the concept of God, and the same applies to morality. Altruistic life sometimes, or perhaps for the most part, collides with the interests of the self, from which a question arises: Is morality intrinsic or artificial? This suggests that, in a way, morality is “a natural phenomenon that has remained unsolved” for humanity. In the long run, we need to coexist with others, which makes the emergence and maintenance of morality inevitable. Nevertheless, we cannot escape from the fundamental question: Why should I care for others? Philosophers have long worked, through the presence of gods and sometimes through a priori judgment, as Kant did, to make intrinsic virtue out of artificial morality, but today’s people seem to be little inspired by this legacy. In this situation, this paper intends to make a bold proposal of a new ontological principle.

The gist of this principle is that the existence itself has a priori value. In other words, existence itself, no matter when and where it has emerged and in whatever form it takes, represents a universal effect of existence and manifests its universal value. Its effects and values are the effects of all people and values of all people. That is, the value of the act of existence is something meaningful to anyone, not limited to that existence.

The words “existence” and “to exist” are noun and verb, respectively, but the essential semantic distinction between the two is most ambiguous. There cannot be an existence that does not exist, and vice versa. Existence is a phenomenon and an event at the same time and is itself

a reality. Moreover, it implies that existence is something most primordial. Briefly put, existence is the common and ultimate essence shared by each and every existence.

Assuming that this ontological principle is correct, morality, as discussed in ethics, is easily established as an intrinsic virtue. And that virtue is both intrinsic and rational because an altruistic act is, in itself, a perfectly natural act of universal existence, not an artificial act overcoming the pursuit of self-interest. If a value arises just from existence itself, formed at anytime and anywhere, and if that value is the universal value shared by all, the human's natural right is established as an objective truth, not simply an idea that must be inculcated by education. This objective establishment of values as natural rights of humans, regardless of whether supported by epistemology and ontology, is a crucial asset that must be achieved. Its justification lies in the fact that the idea that the value of existence itself is general and universal embraces all living beings, humans and animals alike and beyond, in providing the benefits of the firmly established right to life and it certainly is a new paradigm of ethics. Within that new framework, Kant's deontology and Bentham's utilitarianism can stand side by side in the same direction despite the different methodologies and perspectives.

As Spinoza said, what we need is to adopt the divine perspective that encompasses all things, viewing the inevitable and natural holistic schema (Kenny 2006). Even without resorting to the expression "divine perspective," the ontological dimension that the effect of every existence has universality will surely lead ethics along a new path.

4. Conclusions

Let's go back to the forked road we are presently standing, i.e., before the choice about how to look at the relations between the self and others and those among many points within the self. If we maintain a consistent viewpoint, the choice is the identity or non-identity of both situations. How about adopting the ontological perspective presented in this paper? The choice will then of course fall on the former option. At first glance, this option of forming a united identity encompassing the self and all others may make no sense. However, even that feeling may be the proof that our mind is still stuck in the old-fashioned paradigm. Spinoza said:

There is nothing more beneficial to humans than humans. In other words, in order to preserve human existence, nothing is more beneficial than everyone becoming one in everything, that is, all humans becoming one mind and body to form one single mind and body, and all people pursuing the common interests of all together. (Spinoza 1996)

Although David Hume gained an insight that the conventional notion of personal identity is nonsense on the one hand, he made the mistake of thinking that there is no connection between morality and reason on the other. Spinoza, in contrast, argued that all wrongdoings are the result of ignorance. I started the paper with Hume's insight into the self, but would like to close it,

drawing on Spinoza's ideas. Conventional ethics has failed to define human moral behavior as a rational act based on objective truth, which is tantamount to a failure of reason. This failure is clearly reflected in what we witness today, namely the role aesthetics plays in explaining the rationality of moral behavior in the place of objective epistemology and ontology. As Rousseau claimed in *The Social Contract*, society was formed by a rather unconscious contract taken out by each member of society (Rousseau 1968) and our conventional notion of personal identity is also a kind of contract unconsciously taken out by different perceptions and impressions within individuals. Not that this contract itself is wrong, but it is necessary to completely revise the contents of this contract based on the rationale supported by objective truth. What if the party of the contractor is extended to all members of the society to which he or she belongs, instead of remaining a single human entity occupying a body? The scope of extension is limitless: human beings, living organisms, every existence, and so on.

To conclude, we humans need to reveal the objective reality of the self and existence more freely and establish a new ethics through which can open a new perspective and usher in a new era. Such ethics, such a philosophy, will soon become the wings that allow humans to fly.

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