

The Battle for Compassion: Ethics in an Apathetic Universe

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Chapter 7. The Illusion of Distinct Individual Identity

Where does the end of me
Become the start of you?
-Tears for Fears, English pop duo, "Change"

As chaotic, uncertain and overwhelming the world around us often seems, if there is one thing we should at least be able to be sure of, it is that I am I and you are you. What can possibly be less subject to doubt? Yet once we permit ourselves to break a further taboo in thinking deeply about who we really are and probe the concept of identity, we discover that it is far more fragile and elusive than we might ever have suspected. And we gain further, dramatic insight into the absurd roles we find ourselves playing.

We instinctively attribute a unity to our own identity and to that of others: each of us a solid, indivisible entity that experiences a continuum of conscious moments in the first person and manifests them through behavior. The notion of each of us having a distinct, continuous, stable identity - a "self" - is absolutely essential for providing sense and coherence³⁴ to our lives. But it is an illusion. What each of us calls "I" is, in fact, a pattern - a pattern of thoughts, of ways of responding to the world, of multiple strivings, fears and emotions, recurring within what appears as one physical being and continuously evolving. The relative stability of our memories and hardwired character traits provides us and the people with whom we interact with much of the sense of our having a stable identity over time. And the continuity in people's physical appearance provides a reliable cue to the stability of the mental processes generated within. But once we start to think about identity more carefully and shed our preconceptions, we are forced to come to terms with the illusion and its strange implications for who we are and how we relate to each other.

Most of the cells and molecules in our body are constantly being replaced over time. What does maintain a certain stability throughout our lives is the neural

structures in our brains and the patterns of activity that determine our personalities and memories. And the information carried by our genes - which make a major contribution to our personality traits - remains essentially unchanged. The fact that we act as stable repositories of genetic information can be seen as a principal explanation for why we have been programmed through evolutionary processes to regard ourselves and others as having continuous identities. As far as evolution is concerned, you are a reflection of the genes that lie within.

The illusion of our having distinct, continuous individual identities can also be understood, at another level, as reflecting an innate need for stable reference points in a changing world. Although seeing our attitudes and behaviors as tendencies that can be influenced by situations is often a better reflection of reality than the more rigid connotations we tend to use, our instinct to generalize and categorize reflects a more effective survival strategy. Our view of the world is skewed towards the perception of discreteness and stability of traits. This is reflected in language. For example, we often use the verb "love" as if it were a continuous, stable state, even though in practice, there are instants even in a close relationship where one's emotional state can be much better described by rather different terminology.

When our environment is stable, the illusion of a stable, continuous identity is more easily maintained. But if our work or lifestyle has us regularly switching between very different environments and ways of experiencing and thinking about the world, our sense of identity and who we are can seem to fluctuate widely. And as our thought patterns evolve, a result of specific life experiences, new memories, reflections and physiological changes, we may bear little resemblance to our younger selves. It is partly in this way that our own identities vary over time. As an example of how we can disown elements of our past identity, an artificial intelligence researcher I mention later on wrote on his website, "You should regard anything from 2001 or earlier as having been written by a different person who also happens to be named 'Eliezer Yudkowsky'. I do not share his opinions."³⁵

That a continuous, stable identity is an illusion is particularly relevant to how we relate to past suffering we may have experienced. We can only remember it to the extent that our memory is capable of registering and re-evoking what could potentially have been an extreme experience. When the memory is faint, it is almost as if it happened to a different person. This is why when someone lives to recall a horrible event or episode in their life, the person who actually experienced it is, from this perspective, no longer entirely there.

The notion that our identities are distinct and continuous over time underpins our criminal justice system, and it can explain why we absolve children of responsibility for their parents' crimes while holding people punishable for crimes they committed when they were younger. While this practice may seem entirely intuitive, if you think about it more detachedly it appears more arbitrary. People's behavior is influenced by and sometimes closely resembles that of their parents, while on the other hand, people mature, and their thoughts and behaviors may bear little similarity to those of their younger selves. I am by no means suggesting that we ought to punish people for others' crimes. But society reinforces our instinctive notions of identity by focusing more - and, often, too much - on punishing individuals than on targeting dangerous ideas that can spread among them.

We are nonetheless capable of recognizing a change in attitude and implicitly acknowledging a change in identity, to the extent that we talk about someone being "a different (or new) person", without recognizing the degree to which the statement can be viewed as literally true. The expectation that a convict found guilty of the worst offense express remorse for his crime as a condition for a more lenient sentence can be interpreted as a desire to see a clear distinction between the identities of the original murderer and of the person later appearing before the judge.

The distinctness of our own identity from that of other people is also fuzzier than it seems. Especially in individualistic Western societies, the concept of each person being separate from the rest of the world is deeply rooted. Indeed, the perspective of each of us being a self-maximizer is a dominant theme in this book, as it remains one of the most powerful and insightful ways of understanding human nature and what is happening to us as a species. Subjective experience is always associated with an individual brain in its own unique, momentary environment, and in that respect remains the indivisible common denominator of the human condition. But that we each act autonomously, trying to improve our status and, we implicitly believe, our subjectively experienced feeling of happiness and sense of meaning does not detract from the fact that we are all very similar. From a big-picture perspective, we are all just variations on a theme, imperfect copies of each other, each striving to satisfy his or her needs. It is important to reflect on this aspect of identity in order to better understand our relationship to each other.

To further illustrate this point, let's carry out a thought experiment.³⁶ Imagine you discovered you had a long lost identical twin who, let's assume, was brought up under absolutely identical conditions and therefore shared identical memories

with you. Let's say, then, that it was your exact duplicate. And imagine further you found yourself sitting opposite that person in a bare white room in which your experience was identical to theirs. With identical brain states and identical environments, you would each be looking at the other and simultaneously be thinking identical thoughts - perhaps, "How bizarre, he (or she) looks just like me. I wonder what he's thinking." But you wouldn't know what your double was actually thinking or experiencing until you started to talk, when you would find yourselves simultaneously uttering the identical words and realize that you were profoundly "connected" in your thinking.

Alan Turing, a highly influential 20th century mathematician and computer scientist, devised a classic test for human intelligence in a machine. In this test, one uses conversations to try to distinguish between a real person and a machine, both of which are hidden from view. According to his proposal, if one cannot distinguish between the two through dialogue, the machine can be considered intelligent. Somewhat analogously, it is through talking and other forms of communication that two people can discover a convergence in their thoughts and mental states, which implies a blurred separation between their identities. In theory, if the thoughts and mental states are indistinguishable, the concept of separate identities becomes rather meaningless, other than to reflect the fact that the mental states are being generated simultaneously in two physical locations. In between identicalness and separateness lies a whole spectrum of similarity which can be regarded as partial identity and represents an implicit connection between people and even animals.

The idea of us being imperfect copies of each other with overlapping identities and yet in competition with each other is subtle but important enough to consider further. Identical twins started off as a single fertilized egg and thus are as near as possible to being copies of each other, like two versions of the same person who have taken unique environmental trajectories. Typically, they grow up as extremely close friends. And yet, they may find themselves competing healthily with one another. A friend once told me a true anecdote about a friend of his who was looking forward with anticipation to the visit of a young woman he hoped to charm. Imprudently, he allowed his identical twin to pick her up at the station. Upon her arrival, his twin took advantage of their similar appearance to usurp his identity and reap the honors; obliged him to sleep in the bathtub; and, to add further insult to injury, poked his head in to ask if he had any condoms. Empathy is sometimes hard won, even towards those we identify with most strongly, who function very much like we do and share similar emotions. In that respect, we can paradoxically be competing with "ourselves". Each brain is programmed to maximize the satisfaction of its own needs, even though the

subjective mental states generated by different brains, which represent the heart of identity, can largely overlap.

However, along with a sense of control and self-realization, there are few things that make people happier than to feel a bond of commonality with other human beings. We long to be respected and appreciated by others and, the rarest of all, to be understood. There is a great, inherent beauty when two or more people experience similar thoughts or emotions and feel that this is happening. This sense of shared subjectivity breaks down barriers between people, relaxing the boundaries between their identities, and it creates trust. A major disruption in our lives, such as the death of someone we love or a major catastrophe, can shatter our feelings of stability and control and immediately cause our sense of meaning to collapse down to our connections with other people.

The perception of stability and continuity in other peoples' identities gives us the confidence to feel a strong, unbroken connection with another person. Yet a loosening of our own sense of distinct identity can also free us up to better understand other people and connect more deeply with them, and also to care more about other conscious beings in general. Empathy with others is not just a psychological phenomenon but also the visceral perception of a deep, metaphysical truth.

Viewing identity as having less strictly defined boundaries helps us to gain insight into the relationship between the individual and the larger entity he or she is part of, and provides another angle from which to understand altruism. As opposed to cooperation, which is essentially rational and based on self-interest, altruism arises from an instinctive urge to help. As described earlier, it is strongest between people who are genetically closest. The family and the tribe, which can extend to a large political identity with a common language and culture, are perhaps subconsciously perceived as partial extensions of one's own identity, and can also be the object of one's own basic instincts for self-preservation. Efforts to loosely extend the notion of tribe to the whole species and, with a healthy dose of optimism, to other conscious creatures, can help to break down the barriers to altruism.³⁷ Some of the conflict in values between different cultures relates to the differing relative importance of the individual and the group. In more individualistic cultures, there is greater emphasis on personal self-realization and on the individual having a great variety of experiences. But in cultures where an individual's sense of identity, well-being and meaning is more intricately tied to a larger entity, the good of the whole can be difficult to separate from that of its members. And in a very real way, people in less individualistic cultures assume less of a unique identity - reflected in a more homogeneous, less diverse range of experiences, memories and thoughts. At the extreme, people can act and be

regarded like the tentacles of a single organism, shed if necessary to ensure the long-term survival of the whole - specifically, the community with which they share their genes and culture. In practice, this is what happens when soldiers' lives are sacrificed to defend the nation. Having them feel part of a larger entity is a very critical motivating factor for them to assume this risk. But this notion is also exploited in some countries where individuals are imprisoned, tortured or executed for "disturbing the public order" by daring to express opinions that differ from those officially imposed on the group.

This broader conception of identity also implies a very close similarity between making short-term sacrifices for longer-term gain, i.e. delayed gratification, and making sacrifices for other people. Delayed gratification implicitly means attributing some comparable degree of value to your future identity as to your present identity, while altruism means according some degree of value to others' identity. In both cases, you are sacrificing something in the present for the benefit of "someone else". From a detached, external perspective, the importance of subjectively experienced happiness should be independent of the sliver of space-time in which it occurs, i.e. whether it is you in the present, you in the future or someone else in the present or future. But of course, in practice we generally give highest priority to our present selves, while we are usually willing to make reasonable sacrifices in the present in favor of larger future gains, as this behavior has tended to be more successful in passing on one's genes.

In the end, understanding ourselves as repositories of genetic information trumps any other interpretation of identity in explaining our actual instinctive behavior, even if we consciously decide to attribute the greatest importance to subjective experience. The drivers of our behavior thus conflict with much of what matters upon broader reflection, and may take on an air of irrationality. For example, we aim for the survival of our near-future identities and, ideally, of our longer-term future identities, advocating indefinite life extension if possible, even if it no longer concerns the same exact person from the perspective of memories, character and physical appearance. Although defying death is the most natural urge, and not feeling it breathing down one's neck allows one to live with a certain tranquility, aiming for our own immortality is fundamentally not that different from aiming for the immortality of another human being.

"Why am I me and not someone else?"- i.e., why are the thoughts I am having happening *here* and not in someone else's brain - is a deeply existential question

whose resolution illustrates, again, how different things are than our instinctive sense of identity makes it seem. Our very strong, evolutionarily determined tendency to identify ourselves with our physical body skews us away from recognizing that what we are experiencing at any moment could be experienced by anyone with a very similar brain architecture (and thus also having very similar memories of past experiences) and occupying the same physical location. At a given moment, I - my identity -, am *these* local sensory inputs impacting on *this* neural structure embodying specific memories and character traits. Again, I am ultimately just a pattern of information processing.³⁸ As discussed above regarding identical twins, the more similar the pattern to others, the greater the overlap in identity. The identical pattern generated by another brain could be seen as representing a momentarily equivalent manifestation of identity. Evolution has managed to hide from us a profound, essential truth about existence by making us favor our own bodies to an extent that we are blinded to the universality of subjective experience and our common identity.

Have you ever asked yourself why you are alive now and not some time in the past, for example, ten thousand years ago? This is another of those existential puzzles that you might once have tossed about in your head for a while before turning to a more gratifying activity. But the answer, which lies in the whole notion of identity as a pattern, is actually exceedingly mind-opening when you grasp it, unintuitive as it is. Although this might be your first guess, it is not that there are simply many more people around today, hence a higher probability of *you* existing. And it is not that you needed your specific mother and father and the specific egg and sperm that gave rise to you in order to exist at all - an extremely improbable thing to have happened. We think of ourselves as unique and our own existence as rare and miraculous. On a cosmic scale it may well be. But as we have been discussing, identity is not a black and white phenomenon, in spite of the entirely contrary way in which we are conditioned by our brains to perceive ourselves and everybody else. We share our identities to different extents with people alive today, with people who were alive in the past - from Aristotle to Audrey Hepburn -, and with people who will be alive in the future. In fact, there is even a partial overlap in identity with other kinds of conscious creatures. If it had been another sperm with another combination of genes fertilizing the same egg, someone with a similar but not identical identity would have taken your place. It wouldn't be you exactly, but it wouldn't entirely *not* be you, either. Our language, including such basic words as "I" and "you", reflects our instincts and how the world appears to us, not a deeper reality and the various shades of grey that it contains.

This entire perspective on identity may be highly counterintuitive at first, diametrically at odds with our overriding, instinctive sense of each person as a

distinct, self-contained entity with its own unique trajectory. But understanding identity in this way is the logical consequence of thinking about it, and also the only means of reconciling our subjective sense of uniqueness with a detached, objective understanding of everything else. And it becomes more evident when we allow certain aspects of reality to slip into our awareness.

Incidentally, this perspective also holds a key to understanding another existential mystery, namely, how it is, not only that the Earth has all the right parameters to support life, despite the extremely low odds of all the physical conditions (temperature, presence of water, chemical properties, etc.) being just right, but also that the physical constants of the universe - components of the laws of physics - are tuned just right within a very narrow tolerance range for life to have become possible - the so-called "Goldilocks Effect".³⁹ Although a very human answer is to say that someone must have created it so that the conditions were optimal, a simpler, entirely different answer is that we wouldn't be here otherwise. Any conscious, intelligent being that comes into existence is likely to ask such questions, regarding their own individual existence as a miracle and their identity as unique. But again, this is a subjectively felt illusion. If blades of grass had consciousness, the capacity for thought and the self-awareness that we do, each one would also be marveling at its own existence and asking the same questions - on Earth, and on any other planets in the universe where grass evolved. (This scenario recalls an old "The Far Side" cartoon by Gary Larson in which, in an Antarctic setting jam-packed with penguins, one of them in the middle is singing, "I gotta be me, oh I just gotta be me.") In fact, this reflection leaves wide open the possibility - perhaps even implies - that many other universes exist (or have existed) with very different physical constants, in most of which life failed to form. And in this particular one, we happen to have appeared. This unintuitive way of thinking about the world really does stretch the mind, and yet once you "get it", it all suddenly makes sense.

Still, the overlap in our identities with others by no means alters the fact that individual subjective experience remains the core locus of meaning and beauty. Any attempts by authorities to subjugate basic personal freedoms by appealing to the well-being of the amorphous whole give higher priority to a concept - whether for misguided or malevolent intentions - than to real, flesh-and-blood, feeling human beings. Attributing importance to the whole as a *source* of meaning and security does not lessen the importance of individual consciousness. The popularized term "collective consciousness" is just a concept for explaining how many individual consciousnesses in a society can absorb the same ideas. Nothing can supersede the primacy of what goes on in individuals' minds.

If it is difficult to recognize that free will is an illusion and our thought patterns are the outcome of an intricate web of interactions, it is perhaps even more of a

challenge to grasp the fuzziness of identity. Our identity is one of the things we value most highly, and putting the traditional notion into question collides with our instinctive sense of who we are. Viewing ourselves as patterns of mental states can seem literally dehumanizing if we find ourselves losing the thread that ties us to our past and future, and stopping to care as much about the things that matter most to us, even if from a purely metaphysical perspective this view is correct.⁴⁰ We still need to protect our sense of identity from disintegration in order for our lives to retain meaning and coherence in present moments. Philosophical ruminations should not be used to minimize the things we intrinsically care most deeply about.

But these reflections are of far more than just intellectual interest. Lying at the juncture of reflections about subjective experience and determinism, they are integral to a fuller understanding of the big picture. They offer deep insight into the ironies of the human condition and the relevance of others' suffering. In the right doses, they can also provide greater balance in how we find meaning in our own lives, and allow us more easily to shed aspects of our behavior that detract from our happiness. Because identity is ultimately best explained as a pattern, its relevance to life, consciousness and human existence may yet prove to be crucial in the near future as accelerating technology forces us to confront reality in ways that are difficult to predict, but which many thinkers are anticipating in potential scenarios, as discussed further on in the chapter "Where We Are Headed".

The identity illusion encapsulates our whole dilemma as a species: that the universe has bequeathed to us an innate urge to compete with variations of ourselves - an urge that made us more efficient as we developed, with pain thrown in as a catalyst - rather than always cooperate in our collective interest. Every time one member of our species kills another, it is not just an extended form of fratricide, but in a metaphysical sense, a kind of suicide. Finding ways of effectively conveying the commonality in our identities - that we are, at our core, very similar, though with varying neurological dispositions and exposed to sometimes very different environments - may play an essential role in building empathy and reducing the tensions that lead to conflict. I see few things more important than encouraging people to step outside the boundaries of their own subjectively experienced, primary identities and explore others, seeking to respect and preserve beauty wherever it exists.

34 Viewing the self as a construct or illusion is an element of so-called "post-structuralist" thinking. For an interesting article about multiple selves, see Paul Bloom, "First Person Plural," *The Atlantic* (November 2008), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/11/first-person-plural/307055/>.

35 <http://yudkowsky.net>

36 Thought experiments do not have to be practical or physically possible to carry out in order to provide deep insight into an idea and its implications.

37 This is a theme of economist and activist Jeremy Rifkin's book *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*.

38 Cognitive and computer scientist Douglas Hofstadter offers a deep, mathematically tinged reflection on the meaning of "I", identity and consciousness in his book *I Am a Strange Loop*.

39 This term comes from the fairytale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", in which the somewhat fastidious blonde-haired protagonist chooses porridge that is just the right temperature and a bed that has just the right degree of hardness.

40 See, for example, an essay by philosopher Galen Strawson entitled "Why I have no future" that appeared in *TPM: The Philosophers' Magazine*, Issue 38 (October 12, 2009), <http://www.philosophypress.co.uk/?p=726>. (New link: https://www.academia.edu/328382/I_have_no_future_2007)