

CHAPTER I: IDENTITY & MORALITY

A question I often ponder is not just ‘Who am I?’ but ‘What *is* I?’. What is the human identity? I do not believe it is merely our name, our social status, or our background. If identity were entirely determined by such things, there would be no *individuals*, for many people share these qualities. Under this logic, there would only be group or collective identities. I wish to understand individual identity.

The answer to this identity question is as fascinating as it is necessary to find. Only when you know who you are and what defines you can you begin to understand where you want to go. The car cannot move until the driver learns how to operate it, and if the driver is unqualified, they will surely crash. When we take an action, any action, we are able to do so because we have a brain that directs our bodies to do our bidding. But what determines that bidding?

The answer is our willpower. Without the willpower to perform an action, despite the brain and body being physically capable of executing it, we will not and cannot do it. A person who has lost the willpower to do everything cannot do anything, even if they are in perfect physical condition. Even coercion is not truly about forcing people’s actions, but about using threats or incentives to force their wills.

So, what determines our willpower? Our desires – what we desire is what we will. Why would a person have the will to go shopping? Perhaps because they desire new things. Why would a student have the will to go to university? Perhaps because they desire to be educated and qualified. Why would an employee have the will to go to work? Perhaps because they desire to get paid. Whenever we have a desire, the will to do something to obtain that desire usually follows.

Then where do our desires come from? They are determined by our views of what is good or bad for us. If a person sees education as necessary or desirable, they will have the desire – hence, the willpower – to go to university. On the contrary, if a person sees education as unimportant or undesirable, they may have the desire and willpower to join the army instead. In short, what we individually, subjectively view as good for us determines our desire to obtain it. What we individually, subjectively view as bad for us determines our desire to avoid it.

Let us continue our backward tracing. What determines our views of the world? Our beliefs and philosophies, which are in turn strongly influenced (though not necessarily determined) by the cultures, societies, and environments we live in.

Take a Western democratic society, for instance. Because the society believes in individual rights, there is a democratic system. But where does this view that freedom is good come from? It comes from our collective philosophy, which depicts equality as a moral right. Democracy is thus as much a political system as it is a philosophy concerning the freedom of the individual. Democracy is a symptom of this philosophy we believe in; it is not the other way around. And our belief in this philosophy has been passed down for generations, because our view of freedom has also been passed down.

Thus, what often causes human conflict is the collision of opposing philosophies shared by different groups. A person who believes in and supports discrimination can never become friends

with someone who believes in equality.

One aspect that causes difference in people's beliefs and philosophies is the environment of their upbringings. If a person was taught throughout their childhood that animals are nothing more than livestock for humans, then they might not place great value on animal rights. If a person has been exposed to the cruelties of the meat industry, then they may view animal rights as equal to human rights.

But our environment is not the only factor that determines our beliefs; there is another root from which they are derived. This root will mark the end of our backward tracing and allow us to understand the deepest aspects of personal identity.

Almost all of the world's cultures share a common belief in morality. In almost every community and society, there seems to be a fundamental agreement that killing for no reason is wrong. Other fundamental agreements include that everyone should have the right to be happy and that children should be kept safe. This commonality suggests that morality is a shared, universal, and objective concept. If people from different environments have the same or similar moral principles, that implies environmental and cultural factors do not determine our moral coding. So, because morality is independent from our environment, it is the most fundamental aspect of our identity. Our behavioural 'chain' of causation, from the brain to willpower to desire to views, ends at morality.

Now let us answer the question of how morality links to identity. The first thing to understand is that whether we like it or not, there is indeed a collective identity that we are all a part of. That identity is morality. It does not matter what religion or culture you were raised in – at the core of your beliefs is a set of moral principles, such as 'murder is bad', which is shared by most people in the world. But there is nothing wrong with having a collective identity, whether via moral principles, religion, tradition, or culture. In fact, if any of these elements make you

value your existence, they should be celebrated.

Perhaps this is why we defend our friends and allies. We see a part of our identity within them, so to defend them is to also defend ourselves. A fine line can separate compassion and selfishness; sometimes, they even intertwine.

So where does individual identity fit into all this? Firstly, it arises from how well one abides by one's morals. Everyone knows what is morally right or wrong, even those who commit evil. But not everyone *cares*. Politics reeks of corruption, corporations reek of greed, and evils of all types linger in society. Each person with equal knowledge of good and bad is placed somewhere on a spectrum, based on the degree to which they live up to those concepts of good and bad. Where we lie on this spectrum is a result of our own decisions and actions. How we arrive at such decisions and actions is a personal journey. Thus, each of us has the power to define our individual identity, through shaping our principles.

The second element comes from how much control one exerts over their life. Nobody is sent to this earth empty-handed. We all have our own passions, talents, strengths, weaknesses, and quirks. These 'gifts' are owned by us and us alone, and they do not act independently; they influence each other. Your passions will influence how you use your talents. Your quirks will influence how you carry out your passions. Your strengths and weaknesses influence each other. And so on.

Here are a few simple examples. If you have a passion for animals and a talent for speaking, then your full potential might be found through a career in animal activism. If your passion is for refugees instead, then you may become a refugee activist, UN aid worker, or policymaker. If your passion is for animals, but your talent is in athleticism, then you may become a sports person, using your fame to raise awareness of animal abuse. How you go about doing all these tasks will be influenced by your strengths and weaknesses.

Everything that makes you who you are is an independent factor of your identity, but each of these factors also join together into one singular whole, functioning as a complex ecosystem. The moment you allow too much external control (from society, religion, culture, et cetera) into that ecosystem, the balance of your individual identity is disrupted. The system and each of its individual parts are designed to help you be your best self, by letting you use your ‘gifts’ to build your own philosophy, thoughts, and decisions.

Trust in all the qualities that make you who you are, and allow them to play their assigned roles in determining your views, your desires, your willpower, and your actions. Otherwise, you would be letting something else own your mind.

Throughout our lives, the world presents us with choices. We can make the collective choice – make the decision that society deems to be right, *because* society deems it to be right – or we can refer to our gifts, using everything that makes us who we are. Your gifts are your guide as much as they are your identity. Begin to identify them, and use them to navigate your life. The sooner and better you understand them, the more rewards you will gather.

And so, our identity is defined by two things: morals and gifts. Morals provide us with a foundational collective identity, but how we choose to uphold them, and the principles we develop from them, determine our individual identity. Our gifts are all our qualities that were given to us by the universe or developed through our experiences. They represent our individual identity, but whether we utilise them in our decision-making is determined by how much we understand them, and how much we let our environment shape them.

Humans are social creatures, but it is important to remember each human is also an individual. In my opinion, the most optimal identity is one that properly balances the two. Without collective identity, we cannot fit into society and make friends

and allies. Without individual identity, we can never live up to our potentials.

Thus, our identity is not our willpower, desires, views, or even our actions or achievements. These things are nothing more than by-products of who we are. Our identity can either be a collective one based purely on sociocultural norms and expectations, or it can be an individual one, where we are guided by our personal principles and gifts.

Acquiring individual identity is one thing. It is, however, also possible to tarnish it. A question that stuck with me for quite some time was: Why it is wrong to do wrong, or good to do good?

We now know that morality represents the deepest aspect of our individual identity, as our morals, philosophies, and principles drive our views and actions. Thus, to betray our own morals is to betray the most sacred element of our individual character. Each time we commit an immoral action, part of our identity dies. We become less sensitive, we begin to lose our compassion and empathy, and we begin to care less about upholding moral principles. And, just as detrimentally, it becomes harder and harder for us to respect ourselves.

There is also the question of whether we want to utilise our gifts or forever keep them hidden away. If we do choose to use them, we must then ask: For what? Would you use them for good, for bad, or only for yourself? At that point, you might realise that no matter how great a talent is, if it is only used to hurt others and set the world back, then it has no real value. Similarly, if it is used only for personal gain, its full potential is not brought out. In short, because we all have gifts, we all have internal value – but if we never use these gifts, or use them improperly, then we do not have external value.

The current problem with humanity is that we have forsaken morality when trying to find common ground, and replaced it

with culture, religion, and environment. We have used these factors as the bases of our groups and identities, rather than a shared belief in good. We try so hard to look for what makes us different, rather than what makes us alike. As a result, we have created a divided world. Only when common beliefs are used as the basis for unity can cooperation and friendship be achieved between vastly different groups.

That is why morality is so important. Morality can direct the will of humanity towards peace and cooperation rather than conflict and division. When leaders and followers alike are educated adequately in morality, we will finally be moving in the right direction.

Where our morality comes from or how it is determined, I cannot say. As far as I am concerned, it is another gift given to humanity by the universe. However, it is not just a blessing designed to guide humanity towards the path of understanding and compassion, but also a responsibility for every single person to uphold. The universe determines what we are given; we determine how we use what receive. We must also show the universe why we deserve what we have. That is the foundation of life. Hence, upholding morality is not only a responsibility – it is also a test to see whether we deserve it.