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# Identity, Character and Ethics

## Moral Identity and Reasons for Action

### **Abstract**

*The paper discusses the meaning, role and importance of moral identity and character for ethics and for leading a good life (the attainability of good life and pursuit of happiness). The modern society is a society of permanent change and the feeling of uncertainty. The world seems fragmented and discontinuous. It is very difficult to form a permanent identity in such a world. In the past the choice of the life project was the choice of all choices. In liquid modernity, identity is flexible and in a state of permanent transformation, in which one perpetually redefines oneself through becoming someone other than one has been so far. The central question from which the papers addresses these topics is whether our moral identity ever provides us with good reasons for acting and further, which of the moral theories are best suited to accommodate a positive answer to that question.*

### **Key words**

ethics, character, moral identity, personal reasons, virtue, art of life

## **Introduction**

In his lecture (later published as an essay) titled “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946) Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>1</sup> described a case of a moral dilemma. A student approached him during the war in order to seek advice. This young man was torn between two actions and was unsure about what is the right, the morally proper thing to do. On one hand he considers joining the resistance movement and fighting against the German occupying forces that were as it happens responsible for the death of his brother. He feels a strong duty to defend his homeland and revenge his brother’s death. On the other hand he knows that his aging mother is very weak and that him going away from home would probably distress her very much, maybe even to a point of her death. What should this young man do? One often encounters interpretations of Sartre’s response to such tragic dilemmas that the proper question is not what is the morally right thing to do in such situation, but what persons should we choose to become, namely, either persons that choose to go to combat or persons that choose to stay at home with his mother. These considerations show that the resolution of such cases of moral dilemmas is in some sense linked with our identity.

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Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archi->

[ve/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm](http://ve/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm), accessed on December 1, 2010.

In this paper I look at the relationship between moral identity and reasons for action. Can we make sense of the thought that our moral identity can sometimes provide us with moral reasons for or against a given action? If there are cases (as with the one described above) where the choice is not what to do, but what sort of person to be, then a morally justifiable response in such a situation could reasonably be “I am (or want to be) that sort of person, therefore I choose A (over B)”. It seems that in such a case our moral identity indeed provides us with a reason for action that is different for other moral reasons already recognized as present in a situation, i.e. over and above other reasons. I will briefly survey the range of moral theories in order to ascertain if and to what extent can they accommodate the above mentioned concern. I will especially focus on virtue ethics and the relationship between character, identity and leading a good life.

### Sartre and James on choosing what one is going to be

In “Existentialism is a Humanism” Sartre introduces his famous Student’s dilemma inside a context of elaborating the true nature of existentialism against its critics, explaining the facets of the “existence comes before essence” thesis, the relationship between choice, responsibility and values together with the feeling of anguish and abandonment. He claims that a man is condemned to invent himself and that a man is therefore the future of man.

The case of a student facing a dilemma is intended to demonstrate that no moral theory and no doctrine can help him in resolving his unfortunate situation.<sup>2</sup> The student himself realizes that as he reports to Sartre that all he is left with in this situation is his “feeling”; the feeling of what seems most appropriate for him to do. Sartre as well has no other answer for him besides as that of: “You are free, therefore choose, that is to say invent.”<sup>3</sup>

It seems now that for that young man the main question is not what to do, but what person he chooses to be in that moment of choice. And this choice will in the future define his other choices. One could modify a case a bit and add that the student faces a rather similar choice in near future, and when asked why he has chosen A over B, his reply would be “Because I am such kind of person which in these situations chooses to do A.” Therefore there seems to be a way in which our moral identity plays a role in determining the moral status of actions. One could object that this is a very stretchy interpretation and that in existentialist tradition a man is in every instance totally free to choose and invent, therefore it makes no sense talking about such determining identity.

But the question posed in this article is not the correct interpretation of Sartre or existentialism but to investigate for a plausible account of the relationship between moral identity and reasons for action. We could look in the pragmatist tradition and we can see that William James touched upon a related question as Sartre. In his *Principles of Psychology*,<sup>4</sup> when discussing the notions of identity and choice, he discussed the real nature of ethical choices. Here is what he ascertained about this topic.

“The ethical energy *par excellence* has to go further and choose which *interests* out of several, equally coercive, shall become supreme. The issue here is at utmost poignancy, for it decides a man’s entire career. When he debates, shall I commit this crime, choose that profession, accept that office, or marry that fortune? – His choice really lies between one of several equally possible future Characters. What he shall *become* is fixed by the conduct of this moment. [...] The problem with the man is less what act he shall now choose to do, than what being he shall now resolve to become.”<sup>5</sup>

We can see that James is also stressing the importance of the relationship between ethical decisions and identity. In what follows I will try to elaborate the notion of moral identity and then relate it to different moral theories.

### What is moral identity?

Before addressing the relationship between moral identity and moral reasons (for action) we first need some clear sense of what moral identity is. I will try to provide a very generally and sketchy characterization in order not to already committing it or preferring a particular moral theory. Interestingly the literature on moral identity as such is rather sparse, despite the important relationship between morality and the self.

Following the authors already mentioned, Sartre offers a pretty straightforward understanding of a person's (moral) identity. For him a "[m]an is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is". He then continues: "In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait."<sup>6</sup>

For James and the pragmatists a person's moral identity consists of our character, ideals, ends and projects that significantly shape that person's life.<sup>7</sup>

Moral identity seems to be a thicker notion that the metaphysically underlined considerations (e.g. persistence of a person's self-consciousness through time) that are usually in play behind the notion of personal identity. Authors such as Charles Taylor<sup>8</sup> also warn us against the attempts to base ethics on an

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Although refusing to provide a definite answer Sartre interestingly enough elaborates and analyses the student's situation along several dimension. When facing a choice between staying at home with his mother and joining the resistance Sartre views this situation as infused with a choice between concrete, unambiguous, immediate action that is directed towards one particular individual on one hand and more abstract, future oriented and uncertain (in the sense of the success of the action) action directed towards a large collective of people. Sartre views these differences as resulting in two "modes of action." I would wish to suggest an interpretation that these different dimensions are not basic for the dilemma in question; they only add additional layers of complexity and difficulty to the basic dilemma of being faced with two conflicting obligations. What is basic is that the agent has two equally strong obligations and cannot fulfil both of them.

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J.-P. Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism".

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William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Cosimo, New York 1890.

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Ibid., p. 288. Many authors address this question in the context of special moments in our

lives when we are faced with a severe moral dilemma, so they somehow distinguish between normal or everyday moral life and "critical ethical moments" as James calls them or "existential choices" (cf. Ruth Anna Putnam "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist", in: O. J. Flanagan and A. O. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Character, and Morality*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1993, pp. 67–89). Bernard Williams discusses the Gauguin's case in the similar way. (Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1981). This paper wants to sidestep the framing of the debate strictly in terms of "tragic" moral dilemmas or hard cases and investigate the role of moral identity in general. For the discussion of the moral dilemmas see Vojko Strahovnik, "Moralne dileme in moralna teorija", *Analiza* (3/2008), pp. 29–60.

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J.-P. Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

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Cf. W. James, *The Principles of Psychology*, and R. A. Putnam, "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist", p. 87–88.

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Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1990.

impoverished notion of identity, calling for the need to involve consideration about character, ideals, worth and responsibility.

We can proceed with elaboration of a very general and neutral definition of moral identity. Moral identity encompasses a person's moral character, values, principles and attitudes connected through ideals and ends in a meaningful, persistent and relatively stable<sup>9</sup> notion of the moral self, all this being expressed in its actions and projects one pursues in life. Moral identity, understood in such a way, clearly has some bearing on one's moral judgments, actions and decisions, either by shaping the space of alternatives that the agent sees as relevant, permissible or worthy to be pursued (limit on our choices) or by preferring a chosen alternative over the other.

### **Questions of theory:**

#### **moral identity as a source of moral justification**

Now, one might object that this amounts for nothing particularly new or interesting. Of course, being who we are influences our moral judgments, decisions and actions. Our ideals, ends and values are deeply connected with our moral motivation and are therefore reflected in our reasons for actions.

Here I want to introduce a quite well known distinction between motivational and normative reasons. Motivational reasons are the reasons why somebody judges and acts in a certain way, but are not necessary connected with the fact that such and such action is morally right or permissible or have some other moral status. On the other hand, normative reasons are reasons that explain why an action has a certain moral status; they are so to say good moral reasons that we could legitimately point to when asked to provide a moral justification for our actions. In moral practice the two sorts of reasons often overlap, but the distinction is important and straightforward to understand.

What interests me in this paper is therefore not the more commonplace relationship between moral identity and motivation, but that between moral identity and good, that is to say normative reasons for action.<sup>10</sup> We have already seen above in the case of Sartre and James that they are at least implying the affirmative answer to that question.

Let us now investigate – under the presumption that it makes sense to admit that moral identity can form a basis for good moral reasons – how different moral theories are positioned to accommodate this intuition. The starting point will be the already mentioned student's dilemma.

The consequentialist moral theories in general and utilitarianism as a most popular type of them in particular, seem *prima facie* not to allow any space for the considerations mentioned. Sartre's student must choose between two alternatives, A and B. The rightness of those actions is defined by the value of their consequences. So in order to determine what the right choice to make is, Sartre's student must take into consideration all the future consequences of him going to join the *résistance* or staying at home with his mother. His identity, being the person who he is or strives to be, cannot tip the scale in this case; it cannot represent a moral reason for one alternative over the other. This is because he must view and take the value produced by his action “from the point of view of the universe” so to speak. A utilitarian agent must not only be impartial but impersonal as well. His answer (i.e. an answer providing a normative reason) cannot be “I am the sort of person to whom family ties are very important and I care about my mother so I am going to do A.”

Utilitarians have a way of incorporating that line of thought into their theory, but only through the value of the consequences, namely by taking into account e.g. a possible young man's agonizing suffering when having decided to abandon his mother.<sup>11</sup> But this is not the direct connection between moral identity and reasons for action, but only an additional factor in the utility calculus that is incidentally connected with student's identity or with his person.<sup>12</sup>

The deontological theories are perhaps more suited for the accommodation of the initial intuition, but they nonetheless do not succeed at the end. We can examine the Kantian strand of the deontological theory. In the Kantian moral theory one of its basic tenets is that the moral point of view is marked with a demand for impartiality (treat all people equally and without partiality or preference) and indifference to any particular relations to particular persons; the moral point of view demands from us to abstract from particular circumstances and characteristics of all the persons involved in a situation, as long these take no part in the set of universal features that can be part of any morally similar situation, representing the basis for a universally valid moral prescription.<sup>13</sup> In this sense we also find it hard to understand how the student's moral identity (or any other person's identity) in a straightforward sense figures amongst the reasons for or against an action. The same problem reappears for other deontological theories, like the moral pluralism of W. D. Ross

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The provision here is that one should pay close attention to the findings of e.g. social psychology revealing the »fragmented« nature of our character being grossly influenced by the situational and other factors. See John M. Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behaviour*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2002; John M. Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics", *Nous* 32 (4/1998), pp. 504–530; Gilbert Harman, "The Nonexistence of Character Traits", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100 (2000), pp. 223–226 and Vojko Strahovnik, "Ethics, Science and Naturalism: Virtue Ethics Meets Social Psychology", in: Janez Juhant and Bojan Žalec (eds.), *On Cultivating Faith and Science – Reflections on Two Key Topics of Modern Ethics*, Lit-Verlag, Berlin 2007, pp. 203–221.

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Neither will I be concerned with the related theme of choices that deeply affect a person's life (but are not in the sense presented above moral dilemmas) and having also a moral dimension. Cf. R. A. Putnam, "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist", p. 71.

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Cf. Williams' discussion of the related issue. "[P]ersons lose their separateness as beneficiaries of the Utilitarian provisions, since in the form which maximizes average utility, there is an agglomeration of satisfactions which is basically indifferent to the separateness of those who have the satisfactions. [...] A second aspect of the Utilitarian abstraction from separateness involves agency. It turns

out on the point that the basic bearer of value for Utilitarianism is the state of affairs, and hence, when the relevant causal differences have been allowed for, it cannot make any further difference who produces a given state of affairs." (B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, p. 3–4) Utilitarianism fails to preserve agent as moral actors and decision-makers with distinctive psychological identity and integrity.

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One could say that consequentialism must have some other way to include identity among moral reasons. Wasn't William James a consequentialist at the end of the day and he – as we have seen above – defended the link between identity and moral reasons? The latter is true, as is the former; James is a consequentialist, but his theory runs into problems when trying to provide a straightforward notion of right action. James is therefore not best interpreted as act-utilitarian or rule-utilitarian, but as "ideal-utilitarian". For him the right action is neither the actions that produces most utility among all available alternative neither one that follows set of rules that would ensure maximization of utility, but the act that best fits into "the most inclusive ideal", the ideal by whose realization the least number of ideals are destroyed. (R. A. Putnam, "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist", p. 83–84). The problem that is left open is of course how to ascertain this ideal. James himself opts for a liberal "live and let live" ideal but this seems a rather arbitrary and insufficient choice.

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Cf. B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, p. 2.

or Robert Audi. Those theories put forward a list of our moral duties, which almost completely bypass the identity of the agent, the latter therefore could not figure among the basic moral reasons linked to considerations like justice, fidelity, benevolence, freedom, reparation, gratitude, respect etc.<sup>14</sup> Similarly Rawls (his theory being Kantian in its essence) presupposes the suspension of one's identity in the original position behind the veil of ignorance.

This is the core of what Williams has pointed to when arguing that utilitarianism and Kantianism cannot make sense of the idea of personal project that are necessary for a satisfying and meaningful life.<sup>15</sup> As we are faced with a failure of two of the traditional types of moral theory, it perhaps makes sense to look towards virtue ethics for a more promising account of the relationship between identity and moral reasons.

### **Virtue, character and identity**

Virtue ethics is often characterized as being agent-oriented, agent-focused or agent-centred, the mentioned adjectives being differently interpreted but nonetheless pointing into the direction of a shift from the attention being directed to the action (its consequences, its being subsumed under some moral principle) to the characteristics of a moral agent (virtues, character, ideals...).

It therefore seems that virtue ethics is in a much better position to capture the link between identity and morality. The previous two kinds of theories were act-focused – the moral status of the action was determined by its characteristics – so that feature blocked any direct connection between the agent's moral identity and reasons as grounds of the moral status of acts. A person's identity was always merely an external feature of the act or the situation.

Virtue ethics (at least the most radical versions of it)<sup>16</sup> on the other hand defines the moral status of acts in relation to the virtuous person – morally right action being one that a virtuous agent would choose and perform. It therefore allows that the character (we have included it into the initial definition of moral identity) serves as a ground for the moral status of a particular action. One's identity can play an important part in determining the justifiability of one's actions. So in the case of Sartre's student what is in play is perhaps the critical moment of his life, in which he must decide what to become, and this choice will have an important bearing on subsequent choices exactly because of the choice he made (chosen to become) and the values he identifies with. It makes sense to allow such considerations to count as good moral reasons in the situation at hand.

Virtue ethics also makes a room for the most natural inclusion of ideals in ethics. An ideal can be understood as an aim, end or project that shapes a significant part of a person's life. Ruth Anna Putnam says that

“[w]e have learned from the Greeks that the moral life is an examined life. What one reflects upon may be the sort of person one is or wishes to be; or it may be the ends, the projects, and ideals that make one's life. One examines and reaffirms actions, habits, and customs that lead to or maintain desired ends; one criticizes and changes actions, habits, and customs that fail to accomplish one's projects.”<sup>17</sup>

Putnam also points to an example of Paul Gauguin that is similar to Sartre's case:

“Projects explain, and within limits justify, what one does by showing how that action fits into the life dominated by that project. Gauguin's leaving his family in order to paint fits into his life in this justifying way.”<sup>18</sup>

Virtue ethics, by making our characters central, therefore provides a way for the inclusion of what would we tend to label one's moral identity among the reasons for action in the most direct way. If on the other hand provides us with means to resolve different difficult moral dilemmas, such as it is the case with Sartre's student, is another question.

We can summarize – reflecting the basic landscape of moral theories – that while consequentialist theories propose a picture of an impartial and impersonal moral agent and deontological theories a picture of an impartial and not necessarily impersonal agent, virtue ethics on the other hand views moral agent and neither impartial not impersonal.<sup>19</sup>

### The difference between first- person and third-person perspective

A related problem is discussed by Joseph Raz in relation to the debate on moral particularism.<sup>20</sup> Raz discusses a point made by Peter Winch in relation to the case of Captain Vere from Melville's novel *Billy Budd*. In this discussion Raz claims that the agent's identity and character can play a role in moral judgment.

Winch claimed that Captain Vere finds himself in a conflict between his two pressing duties, one arising out of his private conscience telling him that he should not condemn Billy Budd to death (since he is "innocent before God") and the other arising out of his duties as a commander in the imperial navy and abiding by the Mutiny Act. He goes on to argue that Vere's judgment that the right thing to do is to condemn Billy Budd is not universalizable. He (that is Winch) would have acted differently (although he recognizes the same moral considerations as Vere did), allowing both, Vere and him, in this case to do the right thing; Vere has done what was right for him and Winch would have done what would be right for him. Raz analyses such possibility and

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David W. Ross, *The Right and the Good*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1930; and Robert Audi, *The Good in the Right*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004.

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B. Williams, *Moral Luck*. Cf. Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1991, p. 43–44.

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See Michael Slote, *From Morality to Virtue*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 3–7; for a definition of a radical, agent-based notion of virtue ethics. This radical version claims that actions are morally right because virtuous agents would perform them and not merely that a virtuous agent is in the best position to perceive or know what is right and performs such act because they are right. An agent-based virtue ethics understands moral status of acts as derivative from the aretaic facts about the agents (their virtues, motives, etc.) See also Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1999.

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R. A. Putnam, "The Moral Life of a Pragmatist", p. 80.

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*Ibid.*, p. 71. Putnam claims that Gauguin was also in a deep dilemma about what path to pursue, either stay with his family or abandon it, going off to Tahiti and commit his life to realization of his painting talent. She then goes on to argue that his identity matters when deciding what to do, but on the other hand that the success of his chosen "project" is not necessarily relevant for the subsequent evaluation of his choice.

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B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, p. 1–5.

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Joseph Raz, "The Truth in Particularism", in: Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action*, Oxford University Press, New York 1999, pp. 218–246; reprinted in: Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (eds.), *Moral Particularism*, Oxford University Press, New York 2000, pp. 48–78.

asks what makes an action right for me and wrong for somebody else. It must be something about me. But Raz does not allow such consideration to directly figure among moral reasons.

“It was not that Vere’s character of personality, or moral sensibilities, or anything like that figures among his reasons. At least it does not figure as such, under that description. It was merely that it is part of what makes the decision right for him.”<sup>21</sup>

Raz sees such moral dilemmas as underdetermined by moral reason, where conflicting considerations on one side are neither superior to nor more stringent than the others (impersonally judged or viewed for the third-person perspective).

“Whether people are aware of this or not, during their life, through myriad of decisions and actions, people develop their personality, and create their own distinctive tastes and dispositions. [...] The patterns of our lives help us make sense of our lives and of ourselves. [...] It is, however, primarily where matters are underdetermined by reason that we reveal and mould our distinctive individuality, our tastes, our imagination, our sociability, and many others, including moral, characteristics.”<sup>22</sup>

In cases which are underdetermined “it is right for people to act as their moral character tells them to act. But their reason is not that is what they are disposed to do, or that that is more consistent with their past decisions. It is that they can do no other.”<sup>23</sup> Raz therefore allows for our moral identity to figure in our moral decisions but not representing moral reasons.

### **Identity and the art of life**

As a part of the final thoughts we can look at the problem from a broader perspective, from the perspective of ethics as an art of life. The art of life deals with the topic of living a good life, what it is and how to achieve it. As the virtue ethics shifted the attention from action to questions of “what virtues to cultivate and sort of persons we should be”, the art of life poses a question of “how should we live in order for our lives to be good”.<sup>24</sup>

In this vein John Kekes uses a notion of a personal excellence as a formative element of our character to show how one can through practicing an art of life (developing personal excellences, following reasonable ideals and engaging in projects, developing well-integrated balanced dominant attitudes and avoiding aberrations – most probably this is how Kekes would define moral identity) attain a life that is good. Such successful practice of the art of life results in a life that is “personally satisfying and morally acceptable”.<sup>25</sup>

For Kekes personal excellences are essential formative elements of our characters, important for our identity and self-esteem.<sup>26</sup> They are intertwined with an indirect pursuit of worthy ideals, which people accept as their own. The art of life requires pursuing those in various projects people engage in during their lives. Those activities are predominantly goal-directed, but being successful in exemplifying a particular ideal of personal excellence is fully compatible with being unsuccessful in one’s project. One can obtain such a core ideal inside their moral tradition as an implicit ideal or through the form of moral education where one is acquainted (through literature, history, religion, philosophy) with admirable lives (or kinds of lives) that can serve as ideals. One then needs practical wisdom to adapt those models to themselves and their context.

Kekes understands cultivating personal excellences is deeply connected with good life, since personal excellences are character traits, lasting tendencies to



think, feel, and act in certain ways are essential components of our identity that enables us to attain personal satisfaction.

Zygmunt Bauman also closely relates our identity with the art of life. It locates the absence of a stable identity as one on the marks of modern consumerist society. It is very difficult to form permanent identity in such a world. In the past the choice of the life project was the choice of all choices that determined all subsequent choices. In liquid modernity identity is flexible and in a state of permanent transformation, in which one perpetually redefines oneself through becoming someone other than one has been so far.<sup>27</sup> Bauman claims that the product of the art of life is supposed to be the identity of the artist, but a stable identity is something not – as exposed – easily achievable.

We must first realize that life is a work of art and that it can't not be a work of art; every person is an artist of life, not by choice but by decree of the fate. But inside this framework of fate it is still our choices that co-determine our life and these choices must be made despite of uncertainty. Taking responsibility for the outcomes of our choices is at the end this ultimate choice that is central for the art of life and which we confront in our pursuit of happiness.

“All artists struggle with the resistance of the material on which they wish to engrave their visions. All works of art bear the traces of that struggle – of its victories, defeats, and the many enforced, though not less shameful for that reason, compromises. Artists of life and their works are no exceptions to that rule. The chisels used by the artist of life (knowingly or not, and with greater or less skill) in their engraving efforts are their characters. ... Fate and its guerrilla troops, accidents, decide the set of choices confronting the artist of life. But it is character that decides which choices are made.”<sup>28</sup>

Therefore the art of life perspective adds a very important layer upon virtue ethics in a sense seeing a person's life as a more or less coherent whole,

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Ibid., p. 240.

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Ibid., p. 242.

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Ibid., p. 243.

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A somehow related though different move was suggested by Harry Frankfurt in his essay *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (MA) 1988). He proposes that besides the field of ethics (in the narrow sense of the word) that focuses on the question of right conduct and our relations with other people, there is a distinct field of investigation that centres around the question of what to care about and what to do with ourselves. Interestingly enough he also refers to the case of Sartre's student and gives his interpretation of the case. According to him the choice (whether to leave home or not) itself is not of much importance *per se*, if the young man fails to persist in his caring about the choose alternative. So, the dilemmatic element of his situation is either in not knowing which of the alternatives he cares

about more or caring the same about both. The decision to act either way is not going to necessarily eliminate this difficulty.

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John Kekes, *The Art of Life*, Cornell University Press, New York 2002, p. 3.

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Ibid., p. 164–169. Kekes distinguishes his notion of personal excellence for moral virtues in Aristotelian sense. Moral virtue is according to the latter (a) a character trait that is (b) concerned with choosing actions, (c) based on reason, and (d) aiming at the mean between excess and deficiency. Personal excellences do not fulfil conditions (b) (c) and (d); they are connected with choice, reason and emotions, but the connection is not as tight as in Aristotelian account of moral virtue.

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Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 73.

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Ibid., p. 103.

therefore providing a dimension along with which our moral identity figures among moral reasons for action.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

We have seen that the most promising way to relate the notion of moral identity with moral reasons for actions is through virtue ethics account and theories that focus on the art of life.

In this vein one can make sense of the idea of moral identity (understood e.g. in terms of projects, ends and ideals) providing justification for actions given the actions in question fit into the person's life. The frame of virtue ethics thus best provides us with means to justifiably understand moral identity as a source of moral reasons.

### Vojko Strahovnik

#### Identitet, karakter i etika

##### Moralni identitet i razlozi za djelovanje

#### Sažetak

*U članku se raspravlja o značenju, ulozi i važnosti moralnog identiteta i karaktera za etiku i vođenje dobrog života (dostupnost dobrog života i potraga za srećom). Moderno društvo je društvo stalne promjene i osjeća nesigurnosti. Svijet se doima fragmentiranim i diskontinuiranim. Vrlo je teško formirati trajni identitet u takvome svijetu. U prošlosti je izbor životnog projekta bio izbor nad izborima. U tekućoj modernosti, identitet je fleksibilan i u stanju stalne transformacije, u kojem pojedinac neprestano redefiniira sebe postajući tako netko drugi nego što je bio do tada. Centralno pitanje kojim ovaj rad prilazi navedenim temama je nudi li nam ikada moralni identitet dovoljno dobre razloge za djelovanje i, nadalje, koja od moralnih teorija je najprikladnija da ponudi pozitivan odgovor na to pitanje.*

#### Ključne riječi

etika, karakter, moralni identitet, osobni razlozi, vrlina, umijeće življenja

### Vojko Strahovnik

#### Identität, Charakter und Ethik

##### Moralische Identität und Beweggründe zum Handeln

#### Zusammenfassung

*In dem Artikel werden der Hintersinn, die Rolle sowie die Wichtigkeit der moralischen Identität für die Ethik und eine vortreffliche Lebensführung besprochen (Erreichbarkeit des guten Lebens und Streben nach dem Glück). Die moderne Gesellschaft ist eine Gesellschaft des ununterbrochenen Wandels und Ungewissheitsgefühls. Die Welt erscheint bruchstückhaft und diskontinuierlich. Es ist äußerst prekär, in einer solchen Welt eine Daueridentität zu entfalten. In der Vergangenheit stand die Wahl des Lebensprojekts für eine Wahl aller Wahlen. In der flüssigen Modernität fungiert die Identität flexibel, in einem Zustand der Dauerumwandlung, in welchem das Individuum sich selbst stetig aufs Neue formuliert, indem es zu jemand anderem wird, als es bisher war. Die Zentralproblematik, von welcher her dieses Paper die angeschnittenen Themen angeht, wirft die Frage auf, ob uns unsere moralische Identität jemals mit guten Anlässen zur Aktion versieht und ferner, welche der Moraltheorien die geeignetste ist, um eine positive Beantwortung dieser Frage anzubieten.*

#### Schlüsselwörter

Ethik, Charakter, moralische Identität, persönliche Gründe, Tugend, Lebenskunst

**Vojko Strahovnik**

**Identité, caractère et éthique**

**Identité morale et raisons d'action**

**Résumé**

*L'article examine la signification, le rôle et l'importance de l'identité morale et du caractère pour l'éthique et pour la conduite d'une vie bonne (la faisabilité d'une vie bonne et la quête du bonheur). La société moderne est une société de changement perpétuel et de sentiment d'insécurité. Le monde paraît fragmentaire et discontinu. Il est très difficile de former une identité permanente dans un tel monde. Par le passé, le choix du projet de vie était le choix de tous les choix. Dans la modernité actuelle, l'identité est flexible et en état de transformation permanente dans lequel l'individu ne cesse de se redéfinir en devenant autre que celui qu'il avait été jusque-là. La question centrale par laquelle ce travail approche les thèmes mentionnés est de savoir si l'identité morale nous offre jamais suffisamment de bonnes raisons pour agir; puis, de savoir laquelle des théories morales est la plus adaptée pour offrir une réponse positive à cette question.*

**Mots-clés**

éthique, caractère, identité morale, raisons personnelles, vertu, art de vivre