

The Point of a Needle: Communication Space as a Space of Community

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I. Introduction

Identity, in the ordinary sense, is something that gives us the place of things in the world. In human beings, it is common to speak of multiple identities, but we all know that they are unique and unrepeatable.

This essay will deal with the question of the nature and understanding of personal identity. I will argue two main theses. First of all, I would like to explain why it is contradictory to say that a person has multiple identities. In particular, identity is something that can only be talked about singularly. Secondly, I would like to show that this uniqueness is not a private matter but a consequence of the social character of human existence. I refer in particular to two philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson. In my view, these two modern, contemporary thinkers are the most representative for the reasons that explain the maintenance of these two theses.

II. Body

Body – could it be the basis of the identity of human existence? An identity card, which contains several data, is used to name our identity in an administrative sense. The most important information is the place and time of birth, meaning when our body, in the biological sense, enters the world. The two most important details of our exit from the world are nothing else but the “where” and the “when”, too.

The body is indispensable, since matter, under the given dimensions (materia signata), bone and flesh are a necessary prerequisite for human

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existence and the basis of its uniqueness (*principium individuationis*). However, this is by no means a sufficient condition for being human, since it is not its individual difference but its essential specificity that can be claimed for anyone to be human. Individuality, body and space: like the whistles of an organ, these concepts build on each other.

Based on these criteria, our identity can be defined by the space and time coordinates of our body. Does it mean that the borderline of the body is the same as the borderline of identity? If we subtract our body from our identity, will nothing remain? A similar question can be read in Wittgenstein, which takes us to his philosophy:

§ 621. Let us not forget this: when 'I raise my arm', my arm goes up. And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm? (Are the kinaesthetic sensations my willing?)²

What does the question in parentheses mean? Who can be the subject of kinaesthetic sensations? What seems to be moving and what is being moved are not exactly the same. An action is causal. The will, the intention is the cause, the rise of my arm is the effect. 'I am causing my arm to rise. Cause and effect cannot be the same, so 'I am different from my body as long as I am a cause to my body. Cause and effect are directly related, there is no third mediator.

614. When I raise my arm 'voluntarily' I do not use any instrument to bring the movement about. My wish is not such an instrument either.³

What follows from all of this? If we only assume the existence of the body, we cannot explain our voluntary actions.

620. Doing itself seems not to have any volume of experience. It seems like an extensionless point, the point of a needle. This point seems to be the real agent. And the phenomenal happenings only to be consequences of this acting. "I do . . ." seems to have a definite sense, separate from all experience.⁴

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

You can see how the “agent” is separated from the “body”. If I myself raise my arm, if I myself move my body, I am independent of my body. Accordingly, my identity is not limited to the physical identity.

Above, I have stated that the two most important details of an ID card record the place and time when the biological body enters the world. It can be seen how this formulation is false. It is not the body that enters the world, but the agent, as the point of a needle, into the body, into a piece of the experiential world.

In what sense is there an ontological commitment to the existence of an agent? “I do...” seems to have a definite sense, separate from all experience.” – I quoted Wittgenstein. The indexical first person seems to have a definite sense, separate from any experience. Doing itself seems to be the real agent. Accepting the role of an agent is a precondition for understanding the action process. To commit to claiming the existence of a first person is perhaps too much, that is, I do not wish to regard this commitment as an ontological commitment. However, in order to understand and explain the actions, we need to commit to the role of an independent agent.

It is a fact that we are born into age, culture, language and tradition. This is not a matter of choice. Their acceptance, preservation and care, however are a matter of decision. There can be no doubt that language use is a kind of action, so the theory of language use must be coherent with a theory of action. What role should the independent agent play from this point of view? I approach the legitimacy of an agent from Donald Davidson’s theory that is known as anomalous monism.

III. The point of a needle

Mental causation plays a prominent role in contemporary philosophical discussions. This problem is intrinsically linked to the tradition of the relationship between body and soul. The central question of tradition is, how is it possible for an immaterial soul or spirit to interact with the body? In addition to physical events, we can also talk about mental events such as perception, emotions, memory, beliefs, intentions, decisions, actions. What is the connection between mental and physical events? Can human behavior be traced back to mental causes and, if so, what are their regularities? It raises the question that if we assume the mental cause behind decisions and actions, then it is really nothing more than an

examination of how human freedom can be brought into harmony with the physical world and its deterministic laws.

We have seen that if we interpret the individual as an acting entity, then we have to assume some body-moving force. The agent is something which is not independent of the body, because all its manifestations are perceptible through it, but they are not the same. Donald Davidson calls this monism “anomalous monism”.⁵ Anomalous monism is a theory of the relationship between psychology and physics. The basic purpose of the argument is to show that psychology cannot be reduced to physics, because the lawfulness of the relationship between mental and physical events cannot be strictly demonstrated. Davidson maintains the impossibility of reduction, along with the commitment that the ontology of mental events is a physical ontology. He accepts the causal dependence and the anomaly of mental events as a fact, with the aim of explaining the difficulties with this duality.

Davidson begins by arguing three principles. According to the first one, there are 1. Mental events that are causally interacting with physical events (Principle of Causal Interaction); 2. Where there is causation, there must be law. Causation is subject to strict deterministic law. (Principle of the Nomological Character of Causality); 3. Mental events cannot be calculated or explained by strict deterministic laws (Anomalism of the Mental). Can the three items work together without contradiction? The risk is not negligible. If the three principles, including the physical and mental character of an event, are not sustained together, we cannot speak without contradiction of a single event both mentally and physically. That is, we have to assume not one but two events, which is not ontologically defensible.

However, a very important difference is that interpretations of mental and physical systems require different kinds of commitment. A characteristic of physical reality is that physical change can be explained by laws that are related to other changes and conditions described by physics. At the same time, the mental nature is based on the person's motives, beliefs and intentions. Based on all this, Davidson states that there are no strict psychophysical laws. Because the rules of the

⁵ Donald Davidson, “Mental Events”, in *Essays on actions and events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 207-227. Donald Davidson, “Thinking Causes”, in *Mental Causation*, eds. John Heil and Alfred Mele (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

relationship between mental and physical events cannot be strictly defined, the mental cannot be reduced to physics. Why?

There is no direct correlation between the mental and physical realms, because we use different sources of evidence when interpreting the two realms. The role of the constitutive ideal of rationality is fundamentally different in the physical and mental realms. From the mental point of view, we cannot neglect the normative nature of rationality. While explaining the succession of mental events, we are entitled to introduce the normative aspect, while we cannot explain the succession of physical events on a normative basis.

It is here that the irreducible difference between mental concepts and physical concepts begins to emerge: the former, at least insofar as they are intentional in nature, require the interpreter to consider how best to render the creature being interpreted intelligible, that is, as a creature endowed with reason. As a consequence, an interpreter must separate meaning from opinion partly on normative grounds by deciding what, from his point of view, maximizes intelligibility. In this endeavor the interpreter has, of course, no other standards of rationality to fall back on than his own. When we try to understand the world as physicists, we necessarily employ our own norms, but we do not aim to discover rationality in the phenomena.⁶

IV. Causes and reasons

It is clear from Davidson's paragraph that in the theory of anomalous monism, the cause of the anomaly is the actor. If we want to know and understand him, we cannot base this knowledge on the laws describing the physical world. The question arises: what do we mean by it when a person understands the other? "I understand you!" "I understand what you are saying!" – What do these phrases mean?

Let's briefly summarize what has been stated. Following the arguments of Wittgenstein and Davidson, I have shown that beyond physical causation we must accept an independent cause. In addition to physical

⁶ Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge", in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 215.

events, we can also talk about mental events such as perception, emotions, memory, beliefs, intentions, decisions, actions. In the mental event the indexical first person is separated from any experience and at the same time interacts with the world of experience. According to anomalous monism, every event is physical, but it refuses to explain every event on a physical basis. As we have seen, the characteristic of physical reality is that physical change can be explained by laws that are related to other changes or conditions described by physics – at the same time, the mental characteristic is based on normative aspects: on the agent's motives, beliefs and intentions. However, this does not necessarily mean duality. The mental character depends on the physical character. Dependence here means that it is not possible for two events to be similar in all physical aspects, but different in some mental aspects; the mental nature of an object cannot change without a physical change.

As Davidson states when we try to understand the world as physicists, we employ our own norms, but we do not aim to discover rationality in the phenomena. In contrast, when we try to understand the actor who is the source of the anomaly itself, we necessarily employ our own norms, and it is necessary to aim rationality in the phenomena as well. By putting the concept of causality at center stage, we are entitled to investigate not only causes but also reasons.

Mental causation must be accepted in order to explain certain events. But to understand what mental causation is, we need to clarify the concept of reason. If we intend to understand the agent as a causative agent, we need to understand his reasons. Anyone can understand the other individual when he sees the reasons for their words and actions. Not understanding someone, or not knowing his reasons: this is the same thing. We understand each other if we know what they intend, if we know the intention of what they intend to achieve. Well, we arrived at the old Aristotelian answer, that knowledge is knowing the reasons – understanding someone is knowing their reasons. The fundamental problem is that the agent's reasons cannot be observed directly. Why?

V. Communication space as a space of community

The agent, as we have seen, is independent of the body, but not independent of the space-time position of the body. The space-time position from where we look at the world seems irreducible. Understanding is limited by our perspective and situation. We have only

but the finite supply of our entitlements in every moment of understanding. We only see one segment of the world in space, time and in our traditions. In a very specific way, a specific perspective that stands on our personal identity's harsh thesis: only we can see the world from where we are in that one moment – in the same moment, two people cannot be in the same exact space. As the basis for our individuality, the history of our place (peering through our own eyes) in each of our own idiosyncratic space and time is the core of our identity.

This common evidence, if treated as one of the criteria for understanding, has an essential consequence. There is no understanding without someone to understand, and there is no interpreter without an identity placed in space and time. A connected network of non-interchangeable perspectives is taking shape. We can follow the other, but we cannot step into their place without the risk of losing our identity.

The direct consequence of this non-interchangeability is that in a situation of understanding, each individual cannot speak of the reasons the other understands, only the reasons which have been attributed to themselves. Attributing reason is a key criteria the sole way of understanding the agent. In light of this initial question: "what do we mean when a person understands the other?" will be changed to: "on what basis do we attribute reason of the other?"

The participants of communication necessarily differ; however, they are necessarily similar. This similarity provides the basis for understanding. What should we mean by similarities, and how does the process of understanding which is based on this follow?

We understand the other person if we attribute to him one of the possible reasons that determined his intention. But what principle guides us to know which possible reason determined his intention? On what basis do we attribute reason to someone else? We can do an 'exportation' of our own perspective. We can call this principle as universability principle. In structure and function, it resembles Kant's categorical imperative. Reading the Kantian principle sounds like this: "act always in a way so as that the principle of your acts acquire at the same time universal value". How can we transplant this moral law into the realm of understanding? "Interpret always in a way so as that the principle of your interpretations acquire at the same time universal value." Seeing the other's reasons, we interpret it as we would do in their place. We see the other's reasons from the common human point of view, which we share.

If we attribute his intention to the reason that was really behind the intention, we understand him rightly. As you can see, the differentiation of right or wrong is never a private matter, but a community game; it is the social process of giving and asking for reasons. This is the basis of understanding between agents. Understanding is agreeing on attributing reasons. When the interpreter and the one who is interpreted attribute the same reason to his actions or to what he has said. After all, communication is a process of clarifying our reasons.

VI. Conclusions

As I have established in my introduction, I have argued two theses in my essay. In the first part, I explained how identity means indexical first person. Consequently, multiple identities can never refer to an agent, only its attributes. Personal identity is indivisible like the point of a needle.

Secondly, I argued that we can understand an agent in itself if we can make their reasons explicit. This process is based on the social character of the human being. That is, being in the community logically precedes the understanding of the agent's identity, first there is the community and then the individual.

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