

What's for Breakfast? Determining the Scope of the Ethical Self

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For an over thinker like me, breakfast poses an incredible challenge every morning. Should I make something light, like a smoothie? Or something more hearty, like an omelet? Do I want to go for something simple and just boil an egg or grab a banana, or do I feel more like making something elaborate, crepes perhaps? Depending on several factors, my answer to these questions will be different. I have to weigh my time, resources, appetite, and mood before I can best determine what will satisfy me without weighing me down, what I have the time, ingredients, and inclination to make, and what I actually feel like eating. Most of the time, I have spent so much time thinking about the matter that I have just enough time to make toast before running off to class.

While my breakfast poses a dilemma for me every morning, most would agree that this is not a particularly important issue. I may agonize over whether to eat an apple or an orange, but whatever I decide either way doesn't matter. The question itself is a non-issue, and not worthy of the time I waste thinking about it. In fact, most people would think a coin flip would be an entirely suitable method to make the decision. We can contrast my breakfast dilemma with such philosophical dilemmas as the

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trolley problem. While I can solve the breakfast dilemma by flipping a coin, if I solved the trolley problem by the same method, we might think that I was being a little cavalier with the hypothetical lives at stake. Unlike my breakfast dilemma, the trolley problem deserves more serious consideration. Why? Why is it the case that what I eat for breakfast is not a dilemma noble enough to be granted serious philosophical consideration, while dilemmas involving trolleys and tracks are? The answer to this question seems obvious: the outcome of the trolley problem matters, although we aren't always sure which outcome is the right one, but the outcome of my breakfast dilemma doesn't seem to matter much at all. Nobody, honestly, cares whether I eat an apple or an orange for breakfast, but they care whether people die in a trolley incident. While I agree that whether I eat an apple or an orange is not a particularly significant decision, I think we frequently go about answering why in the wrong kind of way. I believe we do this because we frequently misunderstand such things as ethical significance and moral neutrality.

Some Responses to the Breakfast Dilemma

One rather intuitive response to the breakfast dilemma, which I have already hinted at, is that breakfast is not an important matter. But why isn't it important? We could respond that the issue is unimportant because nothing very important is at stake—nobody's life hangs in the balance. Of course, we can imagine some scenario where somebody's life *could* hang in the balance. If I am under a curse where if I eat an orange, somebody dies, then whether I eat the orange is a very significant matter. However, it does not gain its significance in virtue of the orange, but in virtue of the life at stake. The orange itself is unimportant in this equation, and only contingently happens to be tied to the life which is the real matter of importance. Thus, the fruit involved is not of any particularly intrinsic value, because it gains its significance entirely from the circumstances surrounding it. The orange itself still does not matter, because all of its value is coming from something else entirely, some intrinsically good or bad end outside of the orange.

Since, under this picture, the orange and apple have no intrinsic value, then we can say that my breakfast is a morally neutral matter. The orange could be either good or bad for me, entirely dependent on the contingent circumstances surrounding that decision and not on the orange itself. The orange itself is neutral, only the circumstances tied to it give it any borrowed importance. As long as there are not intrinsically significant things at stake, what I eat for breakfast doesn't matter a bit.

Of course, there is some sense, at least, in which my breakfast has intrinsic value. From a utilitarian perspective, what I eat for breakfast could matter quite a bit if one option brought me greater utility than another. I may find that, overall, the utility I would gain by eating the orange is higher than the utility from the apple, and so the question of what I should eat for breakfast is an important one in order to maximize my utility. However, because of the multiple factors involved, and the complications in measuring these factors (as a highly wishy-washy person, I can take hours trying to decide which option I would really prefer), we may find that the time and agony spent on the decision is not worth the tiny rewards of picking the marginally better option. In fact, wasting time trying to choose may lower my utility overall, so that the best option would actually be to toss a coin and risk choosing the slightly less desirable option, but save time trying to determine which that is. On a utilitarian reading of the situation, the choice between the apple and the orange may matter to some extent, but the answer is still the same: flip a coin.

While the utilitarian reading seems to grant some importance to the issue between the apple and the orange, even then that is not because my breakfast happens to have some intrinsic importance. What is important, on the utilitarian reading, is the utility involved, and if my breakfast happens to bring me utility, or if it on the contrary lowers my utility, then the issue of what I eat for breakfast matters—but only to the extent that the issue contributes to my utility.

Even if we grant some utilitarian importance to my breakfast because of the pleasure I may or may not derive from it, the fact is that this pleasure or displeasure is very slight and not very important either way. Beyond that slight utility, my breakfast does not matter at all and doesn't seem to say anything significant about who I am as a moral agent. The fact that I like an orange says something about my identity (I am a person who likes oranges) but nothing about how good or bad I am. A serial killer and a saint could both eat an orange for breakfast. As a breakfast option, it is about as morally neutral as you can get.

While this seems like a reasonable response to the breakfast dilemma, I think it is highly flawed.¹ I think the notion of moral neutrality is highly suspect, and we should carefully reexamine the ethical significance of such things as oranges for breakfast, because I think we will find that what we eat for breakfast is not just indicative of our personal preferences, but indicative of our moral character as well.

¹Let's face it, I set it up to be.

The Bifurcation of the Self

In the literature on agency and values, many philosophers occasionally employ bifurcated language about the self, by distinguishing between “thick” and “thin” selves,² by referring to some oblique “true” self, or by separating the self that is morally responsible from the broader self (and often this moral or responsible self is seen as the “true” self).

This kind of bifurcated language has slipped into Agnes Callard and Karen Stohr’s theories about aspiration and moral improvement. Callard and Stohr, in mostly complimentary ways, both describe the processes and problems involved in becoming different and better selves. Both believe that becoming a better self is not just a matter of how you act, but what you value. In their picture, our values are something that we can be responsible for in significant ways, and are accordingly part of what Stohr calls our “moral identity” (55), or what Callard calls our “ethical self” (33). This moral identity or ethical self is apparently something different from the identity or self proper. I think any bifurcation of this kind is problematic, as I will be arguing in the course of this paper, because I believe that the ethical self cannot be so easily distinguished from just the self, and that attempts to do so often lead to misunderstandings about the self and to narrow view of what grants something ethical significance or meaning.

I have singled out Callard and Stohr not because I believe they are particularly problematic cases, but because, on the contrary, I find their works especially compelling and would like to dispel any confusions which can arise because of the bifurcation of the self. None of what I argue here is meant to challenge their projects or contradict their main arguments. Neither Callard nor Stohr fully work out the details of the ethical self and the moral identity or how it differs from our complete self or identity. As they have more pressing aims, the issue for them is mostly on the periphery. While the issue of the ethical or moral self is not central in their work, I believe that misunderstandings about the nature of the ethical self can lead to misunderstandings about the scope and application of Callard and Stohr’s theories, and so I believe a slight corrective could be helpful to, rather than destructive of, their projects.

²As described on p. 341 of Fischer’s “Immortality,” *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 336-354, referencing the original introduction of the terms by Kaufman in Kaufman, Frederick, “Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence.” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36: 1999, pp. 1-19 and in “Thick and Thin Selves: Reply to Fischer and Speak,” in P. French and H. Wettstein, eds., 2000, pp. 94-97.

Bifurcation of the Self in Callard and Stohr

What is the ethical self and the moral identity, as opposed to just the normal self and the normal identity? Both Callard and Stohr have partial answers to this question, which I will be discussing here. While neither Callard nor Stohr go into full detail about the exact difference between the self and the ethical self, the fact that they feel the need to distinguish the ethical self and identity from the self or identity proper presupposes that there is some difference.

Stohr is interested in identity because our identity gives us reasons to act. Our practical identities give us reasons to act in certain practical situations. My identity as a student, for instance, gives me reasons to do student things, like writing a paper or going to class. Behind our individual practical identities, we have a broader moral identity, which determines which identities will be efficacious for us. My identity as a student will only give me reasons to act if I believe that being a student is the sort of thing that should be efficacious in this way (in other words, if I take this role as having a significance to me). If I don't take certain moral commitments to be central to who I am, if I don't identify with these commitments, then I will not be likely to follow through with them or think that doing so is important. Something like murder may be wrong, but this sheer fact won't give me strong reasons not to kill people if I don't personally see myself as the kind of person who doesn't kill people and if I additionally don't see this feature as central to who I am.³ I have to *care* that murder is wrong before this fact gives me reasons to act. I have to think this fact is important to me. Of course, since so many people do think that we shouldn't commit murder, I may still have strong incentive to want to appear to be that kind of person, to maintain an outward identity that conforms with the demands of society, even if I personally don't value the same things. In this case, I could have reasons not to murder people both because of how I see myself and what I think is important, and because of how I want others to see me and what others think is important. Accordingly, Stohr does not think that an individual's moral identity is limited to their self-conception, but also involves how they want others to conceive of them.

Thus, in Stohr, we have the moral identity, understood as something different from identity, but it encompasses both the roles I identify with and those I want others to identify with me. But there may be additional features of myself that I neither take as a part of my self-conception, nor

³To be clear, I do see myself as the kind of person who doesn't kill people.

that I particularly want others to take as a part of their view of me. In other words, there may be features about myself which I am indifferent or entirely inattentive to, and which others are inattentive to as well. Such features may be part of my identity proper, but they have no significance for how I act and what roles I want to fill. In other words, they don't provide me with reasons to act, and they could be considered morally neutral in this sense.

Stohr's moral identity differs somewhat from Callard's ethical self, because our practical and moral identities are principally focused on how we understand ourselves and are understood, while Callard, when talking of the ethical self, is principally concerned with our values. These are, of course, related ideas. Depending on how I care about and understand myself and others, I will understand them differently and care about them in a different way. Values, indeed, constitute both an affective and an intellectual involvement with the thing we value. While Stohr's moral identity and Callard's values are clearly related, Callard has clear reasons for why she takes our values to be most centrally our ethical self.

Callard believes that the ethically significant parts of an individual are at least partly, but not entirely determined by what we individually think of as ethically significant. She says:

This [ethical] self is composed of those features of a person that have ethical significance—they are the features in virtue of which you are praise or blameworthy, beloved or hated . . . and they depend at least in part on what the person takes to have ethical significance. (32)

Callard seems to have at work here two different, but related, explanations of what is ethically significant. She claims that something is ethically significant to an individual if they take it to be such—if they are proud or ashamed of that feature. But she also claims that something is ethically significant if it is praise or blameworthy more generally.

She makes this distinction more clearly, acknowledging that something can have ethical significance to an individual even if they don't take it to have any such significance, even if they are completely indifferent to it, saying:

An agent's indifference to a fact is compatible with its having profound ethical significance for her identity. Someone who is indifferent to the needs of her immediate family members or friends, or to the dignity and equal worth of other human beings, manifests an ethically significant form of indifference. (32)

While she acknowledges that somebody can be indifferent to something and it can still have significance to them, this indifference to Callard

still constitutes a mode of value, just a negative one. The individual is blameworthy precisely because they don't properly value other people in the right way.

Not only does Callard believe that we can be blameworthy for deficiencies in our values, she also thinks we can be blameworthy for having improperly bloated values. She says, "if you judge that someone cares too much about, e.g., what others think of her or how she looks, you might fault her for the shape of her concerns" (Callard 33). Not only are we responsible for caring too little about important things, we are also responsible for caring too much about unimportant things, or caring about them in the wrong kind of way. For Callard, then, there really aren't several kinds of ethical significance, because the first kind (what we personally are proud or ashamed of) collapses into the second, because the ethical significance of our pride or shame comes because we can be blamed or praised for this shame. Thus, the ethically significant parts of an individual are those parts of the individual that they are praise or blame-worthy for, which comprises both what they value and what they fail to properly value. So when we say that something is ethically significant about a person in Callard's sense, we are saying that they are responsible for it in the right kind of way.

Since Callard sets up the ethical self as those parts of the self which we can be blame or praiseworthy for, we can assume that there are some aspects of the self for which we cannot be blamed or praised. Accordingly, the self includes the ethical self, but is not comprised entirely by the ethical self. Just as in Stohr, there are for Callard presumably some features of the self which are in some way neutral, or ethically indifferent about a person, which are not part of our ethical self, but part of our self proper.

However, Callard and Stohr differ somewhat, because Callard ultimately adopts a third-personal stance on what is ethically significant (since just because you don't grant it ethical significance, that doesn't mean it doesn't have ethical significance), while Stohr's moral identity is primarily a first personal expression of identity (dependent on what the individual believes and what they want others to believe, not on what others actually believe or what is actually the case). While Stohr speaks of moral identity from a primarily first-personal perspective, she acknowledges a kind of third-personal perspective as well (or perhaps an absolute perspective, or perhaps God's perspective, who knows) when she argues that our moral identities are themselves flawed. There is a gap between who we are and who we want to be, but Stohr also acknowledges a gap between who we want to be and who we should be. We are frequently blind to this latter gap, and rely on the aid of others within our moral neighborhoods to diagnose and go about closing this gap.

I believe we can find in Callard and Stohr two perspectives on ethical significance: that there are things that we can take to be ethically significant from a personal perspective by valuing them as such and integrating them into our moral identity, but also there are things that are ethically significant regardless of our personal perspective, from some absolute perspective. I think both Callard and Stohr would agree that our first-personal perspective on what is ethically significant is an ethically significant fact about us from the absolute perspective (and for Callard this is the most ethically significant fact about us), but I think they also suggest that many of the things that we think are ethically significant from our perspective are not ethically significant from an absolute perspective, although it is ethically significant that we think they are.

Morally Neutral?

Do Callard and Stohr have the right picture of ethical significance (at least as I have pieced it together)?⁴ That we have parts of ourselves that are ethically significant (like our values) and parts of ourselves which are not? I agree that we frequently do, from a first-personal perspective, think that some things about us are ethically significant while others are not. But in what sense is anything, from an absolute perspective, really neutral in this way? The word “significance” is perhaps a little misleading, because it frequently suggests importance or degree of worth. Something is significant if it has a high degree of worth. This sense of significance is often confused with the other kind of significance—that it has some kind of import, that it bears on the matter in some way. We may say that some things have a high degree of value or worth from an absolute perspective, while other things have a fairly low worth or degree to which they should be valued. If we are talking about ethical significance in this way, then many things have comparatively little ethical significance. However, this low degree does not constitute ethical neutrality. On the contrary, its low value has very high ethical import, because it matters that it is valued appropriately. So in the latter sense of ethical significance as moral import or moral relevance, I would argue that everything has moral import, and likely to a fairly equal degree (since I am not convinced that moral relevance admits of degrees in the way that worth does).

⁴If I have misrepresented their views, then my critique of ethical significance does not apply to Stohr and Callard, although it would apply to the views which I present here, whoever may actually hold them.

The Ethical Significance of Breakfast

We spoke at first, quite misleadingly, about how breakfast has no ethical significance or moral import, since no life was involved. This language was quite misleading, because what we really meant was that breakfast is not as worthy, as proper of time and energy as human life is. Breakfast is not value neutral, it is simply of low value (if it is valued properly). If a person were to spend significant time and energy thinking and worrying about breakfast, they are blame worthy precisely because they are not properly valuing breakfast by valuing it more than it deserves and valuing it in the wrong kind of way. This would be the kind of bloated value which Callard believes is blameworthy. Even here, though, we have let the language of ethical significance become again confused, because we have merged the idea of valuing breakfast with the idea of breakfast being a morally important thing, in the sense that it says something important about you. While we should not perhaps spend any great amount of time worrying about breakfast, I think what we eat for breakfast is hugely important for whether we have a good or bad character.

I have mostly spoken about the choice of what I eat for breakfast as a choice between the options of an apple and an orange. The decision seems, on the whole, not remotely important, but I don't think this because what you eat for breakfast doesn't matter, but because apples and oranges happen to be very comparable things (in the sense that they are about equally good). They both have an ethical significance in the sense of proper value level, but this proper value level is about the same (or at least I can't automatically distinguish any difference between them). The reason the choice between these two options doesn't matter is not because these options have no ethical significance, but because neither is worse than the other, so a coin toss really is acceptable. There is no strong judgment to be made between the two, so we may as well just "pick" in the way that Edna Ullman-Margalit describes (757). This is the kind of decision in which we arbitrarily go for one option over the other, because making some choice is better than making no choice.

However, the fact that in the morning I am choosing between an apple and an orange, and not between an apple and a human being, is an incredibly ethically significant thing about me. It is ethically relevant that people are not on the menu! And many people think that it is ethically important whether meat of any kind is on the menu. What I eat for breakfast matters, it just doesn't matter whether I eat an orange or an apple for breakfast. But the fact that I am eating an apple (or an orange), says something about me, ethically; it is not a value neutral fact. Every decision and desire seems to be ethically significant, to speak to whether

I am praiseworthy or blameworthy, good or bad. What I eat for breakfast, what I wear, when I decide to wake up, whether I make my bed, all of these are ethically significant things about me. But for most of us, most of the time, the alternative options in these situations are no better or worse. But we should not say in the process that they are value neutral. We should say that both of these options are equally good or bad instead of ethically insignificant.

Final Concerns

While I have argued that everything is ethically significant to us, I do not suggest in the process that we have a kind of radical responsibility over everything we do. In some distant and difficult to trace sense, the apple may be well and truly better than the orange, but that doesn't mean I can know that. Perhaps the apple is produced by an evil corporation that extorts families and feeds off the backs of child slaves. The orange growers, on the other hand, help support a company which is improving the lives of its workers and actively fighting against child slavery. If I knew everything about the apple and the orange, then I would be held responsible for whatever terrible consequences I helped enable or helped prevent. But we face massive epistemic blocks in our lives. There is so much to know, and so little time and capacity to learn it all. We could praise somebody for taking the time to hunt down every fact about the products which they consumed, because they were determined to eat only environmentally friendly, ethically produced food. But we could also praise somebody who didn't bother looking too closely at the orange, because they were too busy with their job fighting against sex trafficking, developing clean energy, etc. We face an opportunity cost when we extensively research and deliberate on any facet of our lives. Maybe, depending on the circumstances, the time spent might be worth it, but we usually can't know that ahead of time, and surely can't be blamed for deciding to use our time elsewhere.

Because our perspective is so far from perfect, we can accordingly use more than one standard when we are evaluating somebody's action. We can evaluate the action based on some omniscient calculus of the good and bad involved, or we can look to the flawed perspective of the individual themselves. The omniscient calculus doesn't tell us what the action meant to the person when they performed it. What a person eats, wears, and buys matters, but why they do these things also matters, and in fact changes the nature of what they are doing. Depending on how they understand their own action, the action itself means something different. I could choose to eat the orange with the cavalier thought that I don't care who has to die

to feed me, or I could eat the very same orange because I recognize that I can't know all of the consequences and because I can't afford to expend the time trying. In the first case, my action is problematically careless, while in the second case my decision carries a hint of the tragic instead. In many cases, the question may simply not come up. If I am so absorbed in other meaningful pursuits that fully engage all of my focus, then I may find no occasion for fruitless deliberation over my fruit.

In all of these cases, the meaning of the choice is very different, depending on my understanding and motivation, and we could hold me accountable in different ways. We could always hold me accountable in *some* way—for being lazy or vigilant, cruel or kind—but the kind of responsibility I have for the action depends on how I am oriented towards the blind facts of what I do. In fact, I doubt we should hold anybody responsible for the blind facts of what they do, since those facts mean something so different depending on why they do them.

Since we cannot ever understand every ripple which will flow from our actions, we should not constantly obsess over every choice because we think to ourselves that it probably has some important, but unknown, moral repercussions. We usually can't know these repercussions, and usually can't be held strongly accountable for them. I accordingly would not suggest that we should stress endlessly about every feature of our lives. I suspect that a certain kind of moral obsessiveness could lead us to live far worse lives and cause us to be less functional and decent people. I only claim that everything has an ethical dimension and that the way we relate to anything and everything says something about us, ethically. There is no ethically meaningless feature of our lives. We cannot know every meaning which our behavior has to every person, which is why we may unwittingly offend or harm others, but we can know the meaning an action has to us. We can recognize a moral import to everything we are doing, and recognize that our decision to eat an apple or an orange matters, even if we don't know every way in which it matters. We don't need to waste our time fretting about things we don't know, but we shouldn't ignore the rich ethical dimension running through even our most mundane pursuits.

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