

Unveiling the Principle of Personalization in Moral Theories

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Abstract

The morality discussed in this paper is presented as part of human personae. It is not a distant notion but a concept embodied within human personae. It is also not a construct of human capability to perceive the essence of reality. Rather, morality is a phenomenon that appears in perception and is personalized into a concept understandable to humans. Therefore, the objective of morality is to comprehend the authenticity of human experiences and integrate it into human personae.

Keywords: deontology, *eudaimonia*, morality, nihilism, personalization, phenomenology, utilitarianism.

1. Introduction

This paper was presented at a conference for diploma students held by Sekolah Bogor Raya on November 8, 2024, with the topic "Morality in the Sea of Nihilism." I have revised the paper and incorporated the concept of personalization in this version. As a result, the title has been changed to "Unveiling the Principle of Personalization in Moral Theories" Thus, it not only presents the theory of morals from a Western perspective but also explicates my own viewpoint on the subject. This version can also serve as additional learning material for the participants as they read these articles. Moreover, this paper demonstrates the young generations's eagerness to learn about morals. I hope it will answer their questions and fortify their moral principles.

Morality is a concept associated with the principles of right and wrong, or good and bad. Cicero used the concept in *De Divinatione* (44 BCE) to describe the proper behavior of a person in society, drawing from Aristotle's work on ethics (*Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudaimonia Ethics*). This paper will focus on the fundamentals of morality or ethics, exploring their relevance in today's world. For example, Plato and Aristotle describe morality as the foundation of human development, suggesting that it brings happiness to human life. On the other hand, Kant viewed morality as a duty, emphasizing a universal principle of good and bad that everyone should follow. Bentham's utilitarian theories, meanwhile, explain good and bad by calculating the greater good. Ni-

etzsche, however, argued that morality should be based on the origin of reality, which is not binary.

By reviewing the various perspectives on morals, this paper concludes that human morals are constructed based on subjective experiences of pain and misery. However, this does not imply that the nature of morals is immanent. Pain is always connected to "painness," a concept built by humans. In essence, pain and "painness" embody human personalization toward the essence of reality. This is because pain is a phenomenon that emerges in consciousness. It is then personalized by humans and articulated through language to be recognized as an experience or event. Morals, therefore, determine transcendence, though they are related to human personal experiences.

2. Method

The approach used in this exploration follows Husserl's phenomenological theory. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) argued that phenomenology does not deal with matter or fact. Instead, phenomenology is the science of essence (*eidos*) that appears in human perception.¹ For Husserl, human perception or consciousness is always connected to the essence of reality. In other words, the fact that appears in perception carry essence in the form of symbols, which humans then personalize into signs to communicate with others. Thus, human bodily mechanisms are not just facts or events but also phenomena in perceptions. Consequently, from these facts, we derive the concept of pain and happiness as the basis for morality.

3. Personalization in the Theory or Morals

This paper explores the theories of morality from Plato to Nietzsche to highlight the principles of personalization. Personalization is a concept used to explain the authenticity of human existence, constructed based on the difference between the structure of human understanding and the structure of

1 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, Trans. F. Kersten (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers

reality. However, human understanding and reality are interconnected. Thus, it is necessary for humans to alter or manipulate the structure of reality to align with their understanding. Consequently, what was once alien to humans now embodies in their personae. In this context, this paper perceives human experiences as phenomena or unsolved symbols in perception that need to be personalized. How does this principle operate within theories of morality? That is what this paper aims to uncover.

3.1. Personalization in *Eudaimonia*

“*Eudaimonia*” is the Greek word for happiness used by Plato and Aristotle. It represents more than just a notion or superstition of happiness. Plato, in *Charmides* (circa 428–348 BCE), asserted that happiness is associated with benefit or advantage. Plato (*Charmides*, 175E–176A): “[F]or temperance I hold to be a great good, and you to be highly blessed, if you actually have it ... and yourself as advancing in happiness as you advance in temperance.”² Plato stated that if something is beneficial for someone, it must make them happy. Furthermore, in *Euthydemus* (384 BCE), Plato demonstrates that happiness is an end in itself for humans, as everyone seeks it. However, material possessions are not guarantees of happiness. A possession, for example, can only provide happiness and benefit if it is used properly (*Euthydemus*, 278A–282E).³ Therefore, happiness should be the ultimate goal of human activity, attainable through reason. This means that, from Plato’s point of view, happiness is the foundation of morality.

Aristotle concurred with Plato that happiness is the ultimate goal and the basis for distinguishing good from bad. To summarize, happiness is the objective that everyone strives for (*Rhetoric*, 1360b2–4).⁴ In this context, Aristotle distinguished clearly between happiness and pleasure. He argued that while pleasure can be part of happiness, it is not the ultimate goal. Happiness encompasses a broader and deeper sense of contentment, which can be achieved through ethical living and realizing one’s potential. In contrast, pleasure is only temporary and immediate (*Eudemian Ethics*, 1152b1–24).⁵ Thus, in human

activity, happiness (*eudaimonia*) cannot be an intermediary goal; it is the ultimate goal. Aristotle, however, perceived happiness differently from Plato. In Book V of *Nicomachean Ethics* (535 BCE), he associated happiness with praxis, or how we treat others. Aristotle believed that true happiness is achieved by living a life of virtue and doing good for others, which aligns with his concept of praxis.

Eudaimonia, in the views of Plato and Aristotle, is the reason for good and bad, or right and wrong. It is a universal concept that develops humans as individuals and as members of a community. Furthermore, the concept reveals that happiness is not only about self-happiness but also related to the happiness of others. In this context, *eudaimonia* shows that it is possible to act for the happiness of others, rather than for our own happiness. For that reason, Terence Irwin (born April 21, 1947) argues that *eudaimonia* is not entirely rational. If it were purely rational, it would prioritize self-happiness over the happiness of others.⁶ (*Plato’s Ethics*, p. 53). As a result, the concept of *eudaimonia* reveals that pursuing happiness does not necessarily mean avoiding pain. Therefore, it is possible for someone to experience pain as the cost of happiness. This is why there is a significant difference between *eudaimonia* and pleasure: *eudaimonia* leads to morality, whereas pleasure leads to hedonism.⁷

This paper, however, perceives *eudaimonia* as a concept personalized by humans to understand the phenomena of human experiences. Plato and Aristotle elaborated on the essence of human experience in the concept of *eudaimonia*, perceiving it as a universal concept used to distinguish good and bad in human activities. However, it was revealed that human experience is a phenomenon carrying essence that needs to be personalized. Thus, influenced by Plato and Aristotle, we now communicate this experience as *eudaimonia*.

In this context, *eudaimonia* is not the basis of good and bad for humans. Instead, it embodies the personalization of the essence of human experience. Therefore, personalization is the basis of morality. This principle not only indicates what is good and bad for humans but also embodies it in their personae. Personalization is the reason for morals, revealing the essence of human experiences in determining what is good and bad.

2 Plato, *Charmides* in *The Loeb Classical Library*, Trans. W. R. M. Lamb, M.A. (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1927), pp. 87–1. Group, 1983), p., xx.

3 Plato, *Euthydemus*, in *The Loeb Classical Library*, Trans. W. R. M. Lamb, M.A. (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1952), pp. 401–19.

4 Aristotle, *The “Art” of Rhetoric*, Trans. John Henry Freese (London: William Heinemann, 1926), pp. 47–9.

5 Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, Trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2021), p. 105.

6 Terrence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 53.

7 “Hedonism” comes from the Greek word “*hēdonē*,” which means “pleasure.” The suffix “-ism” denotes a system of belief or principle.

3.2. Deontology

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) explained morality as an imperative duty related to universal law. In his view, morality is not connected to the results of actions. It is a duty that needs to be accomplished, whether it is beneficial or not. Kant (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:416): “Giving counsel does involve necessity, which, however, can hold only under a subjective and contingent condition, whether this or that man counts this or that in his happiness; the categorical imperative, on the contrary, is limited by no condition and, as absolutely although practically necessary, can be called quite strictly a command.”⁸ According to Kant, morality is based on a priori principles that shape the actions that follow, rather than on practical activities focused on results. In this context, Kant’s moral philosophy emphasizes universal principles, as exemplified by his categorical imperative,⁹ which states that actions must be universally applicable, regardless of personal feelings or experiences.

Furthermore, in Kant’s morality, happiness is not the only ultimate goal; there is also perfection. As he asserted, the ultimate goal of morality is the happiness of others and one’s own perfection.¹⁰ In this context, therefore, the ultimate goal for moral action is the imperative duty itself. He also considered that constructing a law of actions was not the objective of morality; hence, he had no intention of doing so. For him, morality provides maxims for living a virtuous life.¹¹ In summary, Kant’s morality can be described with one word: “Deontology.” This term means “Science of duty” and derives from the Greek words “*deon*,” meaning “duty,” and “*logos*,” meaning “science.” According to Kant, morality is a duty for everyone. However, Kant’s perspective on morals is considered purely rational, implying it is a duty for those who are rational. Is everyone rational? This was a question that needed to be addressed by Kant.

In this context, this paper highlights that the duty to conduct morals in interpersonal relationships embodies personalization. This means that someone personalizes moral conduct and acknowledges it as a duty. Therefore, what is moral, even if not beneficial, originates from one’s personae. Accordingly, the principle of personalization demonstrates that

morality is a phenomenon, which is then personalized to become part of human personae. Consequently, this personalization has shaped humans into moral beings. It bridges the gap between human understanding and morality, unifying them in a personae. This paper, therefore, asserts that the personalization of morality is a duty for all human beings.

3.3. Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) is the founder of utility principles, generally known as utilitarianism. He believed that happiness is related to human progress and advancement. He defined humanity as being governed by natural laws such as pleasure and pain, right and wrong, and good and bad. This set of laws regulates human life and cannot be avoided. However, humans must still take action to achieve success in their lives. That is why every human action is considered moral if it increases happiness for society when it is for the collective or for the individual when it is for the individual.¹² In this context, happiness always consists of pleasure and pain. Bentham therefore perceived it as quantifiable, allowing humans to calculate their actions based on whether they result in more pleasure. That is why Bentham’s principle is also known as the “calculus of pleasures and pains”.¹³ Utilitarianism, therefore, perceives greater happiness as the ultimate goal in human actions.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) further explained the principle of sacrifice in utilitarianism. Mill stated, “The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others. It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness, it considers as wasted.”¹⁴ Utilitarians perceive sacrificing one’s happiness as an aggregation for the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Thus, human actions are considered moral based on the outcome that aims for greater good. To summarize, utilitarianism is a moral standard that is proper for community-based actions. That is why, as Bentham and Mill realized from the beginning, utilitarianism is a moral principle suited for government.

8 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 27.

9 Ibid., p. 31.

10 Ibid., p. 50.

11 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 214.

12 Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, Ed. Mary Warnock (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), pp. 17–8.

13 Mary Warnock, *Introduction in Utilitarianism and On Liberty* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 8.

14 John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 194.

In this paper, the quantification of good and bad is seen as the embodiment of a phenomenon personalized into a sign that is comprehensible to humans. In other words, the greater good is a concept yet to be realized, a becoming that must unfold in space and time. However, this process unveils moments of uncertainty created by the appearance of phenomena in one's perceptions. Such moments or situations need personalization to achieve understanding. Thus, the concept of utilitarianism outlines the environment in which a personae is formed. To sum it up, morality is not constructed by human heuristics or the boldness to make decisions amid uncertainty. Instead, morality is proof that humans are connected to the essence of reality and have personalized it into understandable signs.

3.4. Beyond Good and Bad

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900), in his work *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), questions the basis of morality. He argues that Western philosophy's morality is based on false binary oppositions, such as good/bad and right/wrong, arising from the prejudices of philosophers. Nietzsche asks (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §2): "How could anything originate out of its opposite?"¹⁵ According to Nietzsche, binary oppositions are purely constructed from logical viewpoints. That means the distinction between good and bad originates from the philosopher's perception of reality, while there is no such binary in nature or reality. Thus, everything stems from the philosopher's beliefs about reality. As he asserted, "From the 'beliefs' they try to acquire their 'knowledge,' to acquire something that will end up being solemnly christened as 'the truth.'"¹⁶ In other words, it is merely a perspective, akin to a "frog-perspective,"¹⁷ meaning it is only from a certain point of view.

Nietzsche, therefore, gives a serious critique of the concept of the good and bad as described by the philosophers before him. He provides new perspectives on perceived good and bad beyond the binary opposition. Though he acknowledged that transcending binary oppositions is difficult, if not impossible.¹⁸ However, his theories had a significant influence on Existentialism. Nietzsche's critique therefore shook the traditional norms and prompted a deeper investigation into the subjective basis of reality and morality.

This paper agrees with Nietzsche in highlighting the difference between the structure of reality and human understanding. According to his thought, the gap between reality and human understanding cannot be bridged. This paper concurs with this notion. However, it interprets the difference through the principles of personalization. Human understanding, therefore, always personalized the essence of reality and embodies it within personae. This does not mean that personae reflect the essence of reality, but they express the personalization of it. As a result, personae carry the trace of the essence of reality. Thus, the gap between the structure of reality and human understanding remains unbridged. Nevertheless, there is a trace of the essence of reality embodied in space and time in the form of personae.

4. Conclusion

Morality serves as a guide for living virtuously. It is not just a concept for a decent life but a practical "tool" for building a quality life, both individually and within a community. Since humans live in communities, morality is crucial for fostering healthy relationships among members. Therefore, morality focuses on promoting happiness for ourselves and others. How we treat others reveals the underlying cause of our good and bad actions. However, morality is actually a phenomenon that appears in perception, interrupting human existence and creating anxiety. Thus, with their audacity, humans personalized it not into a mere concept of morality but integrated it within their personae. That is why morality is not just a concept of virtue in life; it is a phenomenon that shaped human personae. Finally, morals are embodied in how someone treats others, including strangers and the least fortunate.

15 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 5

16 Ibid., p. 6.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

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