

I.

The idea that we should respect difference is everywhere these days: think corporate circulars, the clichéd lesson of the lazy B-movie, or (I swear) the theme of every other toddler picture book. But this wasn't always so. In early modern Europe, even slight deviation from conformity invited accusation of the great vice of "singularity," of desiring to "differ from others" and to follow one's "private fancy and vanity."¹ And the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska similarly describes being repeatedly told, under communism, that one would "attain boundless bliss by merging with the nameless masses," when "in reality, we all yearn to be different, to stand out in a crowd."²

This is a yearning that can be hard to satisfy even in the supposedly individualistic West. Even if we set aside the view that consumerism is just an attack on individuality by other means,³ being genuinely different isn't so easy. Paul Valéry tells us that the desire to be different can become an obsession, that some people experience the "evil of not being unique" and

I am extremely grateful to Saul Smilansky and several Associate Editors for excellent written comments, and to participants in events in Edinburgh, Oxford and Zurich, and at the 4th *International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life* in Pretoria, for many useful suggestions, with special thanks to Thaddeus Metz, Rivkah Weinberg, and Tom Sinclair.

1. Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfillment in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27. There would be no need for such warnings if the desire to diverge was rare or weak, even if only few dared to affirm it back then. One of those few was Margaret Cavendish, who wrote that she "always took delight in a singularity" (in *ibid.*).

2. Wislawa Szymborska, "No One Thinks in Esperanto," *New York Review of Books*, August 19, 2021.

3. See the discussion of "pseudo-individualism" in Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," reprinted in Storey, J. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (The University of Georgia: Athens), 203–4. See also Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Noerr, trans. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 29.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Philosophy & Public Affairs* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.
Philosophy & Public Affairs 9999, no. 9999

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](#) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

wear themselves out in the attempt to find something that will distinguish them from others⁴—to be, or do, something that will make them, to shift to a more contemporary idiom, “so f-ing special.”⁵

It is easy enough to see why it is morally wrong to mock or hound others simply because they are different—even easier if these are just superficial differences that mask a common humanity. But this familiar moral claim is concerned with how we should relate to the different given that they *are* different. It says nothing about why it matters that anyone is different in the first place. It cannot explain why people fear the “evil of not being unique,” why they go to great lengths to try to distinguish themselves or be “singular.” After all, respect for existing differences is compatible with thinking that a world of complete uniformity would be perfectly fine.

Oscar Wilde once quipped that “[m]ost people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.”⁶ Elsewhere he says that the “immense value” of individuality lies in seeking to “disturb [the] monotony of type, slavery of custom, tyranny of habit, and the reduction of man to the level of a machine.”⁷

Wilde is clearly unimpressed by conformity, but he is also expressing a distaste for uniformity—for “monotony of type.” But we can’t be sure since Wilde understandably assumes that conformity and uniformity go together, reducing people to something mechanical. Mill’s celebration of individuality in *On Liberty*, and other defenses of difference, face the same problem: they often conflate individuality, understood as personal difference, with conformity, lack of autonomy, or inauthenticity.⁸ Such conflation is natural since, in the world around us, these things do tend to go

4. Paul Valéry, “Stendhal,” in *Stendhal*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 14–5.

5. Radiohead, “Creep.”

6. Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 1084.

7. Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man,” reprinted in Josephine M. Guy (ed.) *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. Vol. 4, Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 250.

8. J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), chap. 3. Or, to shift to something completely different, think of that scene in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* where Brian implores his followers to “think for yourselves” rather than follow him, because they are “all individuals” and “all different.” We’re meant to find it absurd when they reply in unison “Yes, we’re all different!” But that reply is self-defeating in two very different ways.

together. This makes it hard to see whether individuality is itself desirable, or is worth wanting only as a close marker of other things we already value, such as autonomy, or even merely for its instrumental benefits—getting that extra attention, spurring entrepreneurship in the marketplace of ideas, and so forth.

I will argue that individuality, understood in terms of our differences from others, is itself an intrinsic personal good over and above its potential links with autonomy and authenticity, and independently of the instrumental benefits it may have in some circumstances.⁹ We have an interest in being, not just separate persons, but distinct individuals, and in being valued as such, as opposed to just blending into the “nameless masses.” This is why at least sometimes, and for certain (not all) differences, knowing that doing something would distinguish us from others is a noninstrumental, pro tanto prudential reason for us to do that thing: when we face two options, taking the road less traveled can make all the difference *simply because* it is less traveled—and therefore *makes* us different.

Because individuality is typically entangled—and commonly conflated—with a range of other things, I will start, in Section II, with a dystopian scenario which allows us to sharply distinguish individuality from nonconformity, freedom, autonomy, authenticity, numerical difference, moral status, the impersonal value of diversity or rarity, and various instrumental benefits. This imaginary scenario most directly supports the claim that lack of sufficient difference from others is a distinctive kind of evil. But I will suggest we should also accept the wider claim that, even when we are different enough to avoid that evil, it can be in one respect better for us to be even more individual. It is natural to think that if we have an interest in being one of a kind, that is because that helps make us irreplaceable. In Section III, I will argue that while the value of individuality cannot be explained in this way, reflection on the role of individuality in relationships can help us see why interpersonal repetition can be generally a threat, and why it therefore matters to us that we, and at least some of what we do, are distinctive. In Section IV, I argue that our differences from others have value for us only when they are difference *in* value—to care about individuality isn’t to glorify mere eccentricity. I also sketch

9. I’ll use “intrinsic” to refer to final (noninstrumental) value; our differences from others are obviously not our intrinsic properties.

an approach to aggregating our various differences from others in order determine the overall personal value of our individuality. In Section V, I ask whether Wilde is right that most of us suffer the evil of indistinctness because we are merely “other people,” and address the complaint that a concern with individuality is merely a recent and parochial development. I will end by gesturing at some wider implications of taking individuality seriously.

II.

II.A. *A Dystopian Scenario*

I have in front of me an old illustration from *Brave New World*. It depicts a familiar dystopian scene of row upon row of identical clones, as far as the eye can see. Such a scene is instantly disturbing. It is vastly more disturbing if we are told that these clones aren’t just look-alikes, but are also alike within—if they have identical personalities, identical interests and hobbies, identical pasts, even identical thoughts are crossing their minds just now.

I will begin by investigating why such a scenario is chillingly disturbing. In the pulp science fiction tale, we know what usually completes the scene: a brutal totalitarian regime enforces complete conformity and punishes the slightest deviation in the name of some sinister ideology; the narrative arc inevitably follows a free spirit whose dissent the authorities attempt to crush. Such a world would be awful in familiar ways, but we need to distinguish what disturbs us about the unvaried sameness from what might disturb us about its causal source. A totalitarian regime can also try to enforce extravagant difference, while sameness might arise uncoerced, simply because people share identical genes and environments, if there’s no randomness or noise in the process. This scene of utterly identical persons remains deeply disturbing even if there is nothing untoward in the story behind it. And please don’t think of the scenario as due to any kind of duplication of some original, or genetic engineering by sinister scientists; assume that this scene of identical people is somehow the product of purely natural forces. To avoid irrelevant

associations, I will refer to the persons populating the scenario not as clones but as “Identicals.”¹⁰

Wilde and Mill associate lack of individuality with being mechanical, clock-like. Perhaps what’s wrong with the Identicals is that they lack freedom? If they are genuinely free, and not under the sway of others, why do they act in unison? Well, on a compatibilist view of freedom there is no difficulty with the idea of free agents independently making the very same choices, time after time, if their starting points and surroundings are identical. But libertarian freedom is also compatible with people choosing alike, even if that’s probably improbable.

Nor need the Identicals lack autonomy. Imagine that the Identicals live their lives exactly as they see fit—and that they *can* live their lives in *whichever* way they see fit—that they make their own informed choices, follow their own conception of the good. It’s just that they always choose exactly the same things, in exactly the same way.¹¹

Lack of authenticity is also not the problem. There’s no reason to think that the Identicals aren’t true to themselves. They aren’t imitating anyone else, or living against their deepest natural inclinations. Since they have

10. If you balk at the distance between us and such a world, you are welcome to also consider a less radical scenario where you discover that you, or someone you care about, has a complete double. It is pretty much a given of both fiction and philosophical discussion of duplication and replaceability that the appearance of such a doppelgänger would be deeply disquieting even prior to any effect on your life. However, as we shall see later, the existence of such a double can be compatible with you still counting as highly individual, so long as significant differences remain between you and many other people. Moreover, since in our world having a doppelgänger is quite extraordinary, this may actually make you stand out *more*. And if we instead simply imagine ourselves, and many people around us, becoming increasingly similar, that would threaten our current projects, relationships, and psychological continuity in obvious ways. I’ll therefore ground my initial discussion in the more radical hypothetical scenario of the Identicals. But we’ll also consider multiple more realistic examples later on.

11. Conversely it’s easy enough to conceive of individuality without autonomy. Having one’s life run by a committee is incompatible with being autonomous. But if it’s a committee of creative geniuses, one’s life might be thrillingly unique. Individuality and autonomy can even be in tension. We want to have control over our own lives, yet how distinct we are inherently depends on others. Still, many other aspects of our lives are also at least *causally* dependent on others. And as we shall see, a concern about individuality needn’t become a zero-sum battle for attention. Yes, it does direct our gaze to others. But I think that one proper exercise of our autonomy is to actively seek to locate ourselves in a distinctive position in social space.

the same nature, their “true self” is also the same.¹² Inauthenticity is ultimately a failure that is internal to the self. But the problem with the Identicals couldn’t be internal in this way. It must relate to each Identical’s surroundings—to facts about what the *others* are like. Authenticity is only contingently linked to difference.¹³ Being authentic will make people different only if they already have different starting points—genetic, experiential, and so forth. But if people share their “natures” then to be different would be a mark of *inauthenticity*. Moreover, when people seek to differentiate themselves from others they are looking out, not in. They needn’t be trying to bring to light differences that are already there; they aim to create new ones.

II.B. Identity, Status, and Morality

Scenarios involving qualitatively identical clones are often raised in discussion of personal identity. That discussion is concerned with the conditions under which one or more future copies of an existing person might be numerically identical with that person. We aren’t concerned here with numerical identity over time but with qualitative identity between numerically distinct persons (not with intrapersonal continuity but with *interpersonal discontinuity*.) And the Identicals are surely numerically distinct. They are consequently also prudentially distinct—even on Parfit’s view, psychological similarity is relevant for prudential concern only when accompanied by appropriate causal relations; but there are no such relations between the Identicals, nor are they copies of any original.¹⁴

12. Contrast Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” (reprinted in his *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2021), 7–13), where natural differences between people are artificially concealed to enforce a brutal egalitarianism.

13. Friedrich Nietzsche, another author who ascribes supreme value to uniqueness of self, simply assumes that individuality and authenticity overlap. He writes, for example, of “the will to be one’s self, and to distinguish oneself” (*Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Richard Polt (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 73), and famously wrote that we “*want to become those we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable. . .” (*The Gay Science*, ed. Williams, trans. Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 189). Thaddeus Metz drew my attention to unpublished work by Mpho Tshivhase, who also ties the value of the uniqueness of persons to authenticity and autonomy.

14. In fact, although this isn’t often noticed, Parfit sees individuality as a *condition* for genuine psychological continuity: he suggests that the relevant psychological features must distinguish a person “from most of the other people in [a community]”; they need to involve connections that are “distinctive, or different in different people” (Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 515).

The Identicals, then, are as separate as any set of persons. And since they are rational, autonomous agents, they easily meet the conditions for possessing full moral status, and therefore possess the same rights that we enjoy.¹⁵ If it's wrong to throw one of us in front of a runaway trolley to save five others, it should be equally wrong to do so to an Identical.

Some authors who recognize the significance of individuality nevertheless make the mistake of tying it to moral status. Nozick, for example, briefly proposes that in order to be morally important, we need to be not just an "I" but be a "unique, individualized *I*" with its "own perspective, a special slant on the world."¹⁶ But Nozick backs down from seeing individuality as essential to being a self. He wonders whether, even if *having* such a perspective is "crucial to the nature of the self," it really needs to be "unique and individual." He ultimately rejects this further requirement because

we can imagine science fiction duplications (in a qualitatively indistinguishable environment) of all the nonreflexive characteristics of a self—including the type of perspective or slant. . . Thus, individuality and uniqueness is not guaranteed by the very nature of being a self.¹⁷

The first line of this passage basically gestures at the Identicals scenario. Nozick concludes that even qualitatively identical persons are genuine selves. Another conclusion should be that they are as morally important as us, in the sense of having the same moral status. It doesn't follow, though, that individuality is unimportant. Just that this is the wrong place to locate its significance.

Kagan is another author who ties individuality to moral status. In a discussion of the role of autonomy in justifying attributing a higher moral status to humans, Kagan appeals to the idea that while non-human

15. As Kamm writes, "even if there were a clone who was phenotypically identical to me. . . that would not mean that I would be [morally] replaceable by it. *This is because the clone still would not be me.*" (F. M. Kamm, "Moral Status and Personal Identity: Clones, Embryos, and Future Generations," *Social Philosophy & Policy* 22, no. 2 (2005): 294). Frankfurt similarly remarks that "the moral value of individuals. . . would not be diminished in the slightest even if they were all exactly the same" (Harry Frankfurt, "Some Thoughts About Caring," *Ethical Perspectives* 5, no. 1 (1998): 8).

16. Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 454.

17. Ibid.

animals have preferences and agency, they lack genuine autonomy because their preferences are merely instinctive, and each animal species pretty much has “the very same sort of preferences”—preferences that are therefore not really their own.¹⁸ Kagan argues that if someone’s preferences are merely “generic” in this way, then “one can hardly be said to be autonomous.” What autonomy requires, on Kagan’s view, is “the ability to set ends, in the sense that one must be able to set one’s own ends, ends that differ at least somewhat from that of one’s fellows.” We humans meet this condition because “[o]ur lives display individuality; they are not mere copies of a generic prototype.”

I agree that this difference in degree of individuality is a neglected difference between humans and other animals. But to repeat: the contrast between instinct and choice is distinct from that between the uniform and the individual, even if the two are usually causally linked. Once this is in view, linking humans’ higher status to their greater individuality loses its plausibility. It’s not clear what Kagan would say about beings like the Identicals who do set their own ends yet where these ends *don’t* differ from those of their fellows. It’s hard to believe that they would have a lower moral status than us, let alone a status as low as that which many ascribe to non-human animals—most of which possess *greater* individuality than the Identicals. Moreover, Kagan is operating with a categorical sense of individuality—we just need to have ends that differ “at least somewhat” from those of others. Since Kagan concedes that animals do differ somewhat from one another, there must be a threshold of difference that we cross but they don’t. But this cannot explain why at least some seek to become even *more* different.

We find the Identicals disturbing, but if we view the scenario from a purely moral standpoint it is hard to see the problem. There’s nothing morally awry about the way they came about, or why they continue to be identical. And for those who care about distributive justice, the scenario is practically utopian since the Identicals enjoy perfect equality. Still: even if it’s perhaps enough, for morality, if we are numerically different persons, the Identicals suggest that being “mere ends” isn’t enough for life. We want to be, not just *separate persons*, but also *distinct individuals*.

18. Shelly Kagan, *How to Count Animals, More or Less* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 199.

This may seem to echo a familiar criticism of the focus of Kantian ethics on our pure will or rationality. For example, Murdoch writes that

“Kant does not tell us to respect whole particular tangled-up historical individuals, but to respect the universal reason in their breasts. In so far as we are rational and moral we are all the same. . .”¹⁹

And Frankfurt complains that

“this pure will is a very peculiar. . . place in which to locate an indispensable condition of individual autonomy. After all, its purity consists precisely in the fact that it is wholly untouched by any of the contingent features that make people distinctive. . . The pure will has no individuality whatsoever.”²⁰

It can *sound* as if Murdoch and Frankfurt are complaining that Kant fails to attend to human individuality. But the contrast between abstract rationality or pure will and contingent, tangled-up individuals is also distinct from that between the uniform and the distinctive. The Identicals aren’t bare persons: they can be tangled-up and laden with contingent features, and in that sense have a specific, non-universal identity—yet still be all the same, and possess no individuality whatsoever. An ethical framework or account of autonomy can be sensitive to the contingent richness of persons’ personality without requiring that these persons be different from each other.²¹ Murdoch is therefore mistaken when she writes that “[t]he more the separateness and differentness of other people is realized. . . the

19. Iris Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Good,” *Chicago Review* 13, no. 3 (1959): 51.

20. Harry Frankfurt, “Autonomy, Necessity, and Love,” in his *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 132.

21. In his argument for the centrality of character, Bernard Williams similarly highlights the importance of differences between people. But he admits that his argument in fact only “depends on the idea of one person’s having a character, in the sense of having projects and categorical desires. . . nothing has yet been said about different people having different characters.” And he concedes that what he says is compatible with “these drives, and this life, being much like others. They give [a person], distinctively, a reason for living this life. . . but they do not require him to lead a *distinctive* life.” Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality,” in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 14–5.

harder it becomes to treat a person as a thing²² — the Identicals aren't different yet still mustn't be treated as things.

II.C. Rarity and Diversity

As we saw earlier, Nozick concedes that non-unique selves are genuine selves. But he wonders in passing whether they might nevertheless be less valuable because "less scarce."²³ And it's admittedly natural to think that the value of individuality just is the conjunction of the independent value of being rare, and our personal interest in *us* possessing this further value. But I doubt we can explain the value of individuality in this way.

Unlike the Identicals, each of us is unique. But it would be odd to describe us, or even those who are floridly individual, as rare. Nor would the desire to distinguish ourselves, let alone stand out in a crowd, be fulfilled by being the last human on Earth. Moreover, if we *do* count as rare, we'd still count as rare even if there were another person who was qualitatively identical to us; but such a doppelgänger could already threaten our individuality. Finally, even if it were better to be rare, this won't explain why lack of distinctness is an evil.

Mill defends individuality by arguing that "diversity [is] not an evil, but a good."²⁴ And the uniformity of the Identicals can also be described as an absence of diversity. Now proponents of diversity usually appeal to a wide range of instrumental considerations, none of which is relevant in our case. We can assume, for example, that the Identicals already live wonderful lives (so far as current theories of well-being go—see below), so there's no need for further "experiments in living" to discover even better ways to live. And even if viewpoint diversity helps advance inquiry, we can suppose that the Identicals' view of the world is already very much on track. Such instrumental considerations couldn't be the source of the problem.

On some views, diversity matters non-instrumentally. One common way of developing this idea, however, is to hold that we should preserve existing diversity. But that is also irrelevant to our scenario. On a stronger view, diversity itself is an intrinsic good such that the more diverse the world, the better. Leibniz famously held something like this view. It's

22. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 66.

23. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 454.

24. *Ibid.*

natural to understand this as a claim about populations or worlds; as such it is a claim about impersonal value—in the same way that, on some views, equality has intrinsic value independently of whether it benefits anyone. But it seems doubtful that we should aim to promote diversity if this benefits no one—that it would be better if the Identicals were made different from each other even if this were worse for *them*. And if diversity matters only as an impersonal value, it cannot capture our sense that something fundamental is missing from the Identicals' own lives, not only from the world that contains them. A world in which just one identical out of thousands becomes markedly different would still be only marginally more diverse. But that change, which would endow that single identical with spectacular individuality, would be momentous so far as that identical is concerned.

II.D. Well-Being

I'm not denying that a world populated by numerous Identicals is, in one important respect, worse than our world. Yet Mill, I believe, was right to see individuality as a central element of well-being:²⁵ such a world would be worse largely because this uniformity is bad *for* each of the Identicals. The problem is that current theories of well-being are perfectly compatible with thinking that the Identicals are leading marvelous lives. Take first hedonism. We can easily assume that the Identicals are perfectly content, that their days are passed pleasantly, that they don't suffer (including, feel depressed *about* being the same as everyone else). The same goes for desire-satisfaction accounts of well-being. There's no difficulty in imagining that the Identicals' various desires are fully satisfied, even the desires they would have if fully informed and procedurally rational. To be sure, if the Identicals deeply desired to be different, this desire would be frustrated. But while I think that they *should* so desire, there's no reason to suppose they must.

Hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories are incompatible with the impression that something is missing from the Identicals' lives, and if individuality has intrinsic prudential value it will therefore count as an objective good. But the items that typically appear on lists of objective goods could also be realized to a superlative degree by our Identicals: we can assume that the Identicals possess deep knowledge of the world, engage

25. Mill, *On Liberty*.

in impressive achievements, are capable of profound aesthetic engagement, and so forth.

Many lists of objective goods include deep personal relationships and it's admittedly harder to see how the Identicals could form genuine friendships with each other—they would need to be just very similar, not literally identical. But even if we think that genuine personal relationships require qualitatively distinct individuals,²⁶ this can be accommodated by our scenario: imagine that there are *two* kinds of Identicals, and each pair is in a relationship—each pair going through exactly the same motions in parallel. Such a scenario would perhaps be slightly less horrifying, but just ever so slightly.

So virtually all current accounts of well-being tell us that the lives of the Identicals are perfect. But surely this isn't even remotely true. There's something wrong with the Identicals' lives: we'd find it instantly intelligible if they tried to differentiate themselves, even at a cost. If you agree, then you must also agree that their misfortune lies simply in their uniformity.

Please don't misunderstand the work that the Identicals are meant to do. The case for seeing difference as having intrinsic personal value doesn't begin or end with our sense that something is awry with this imaginary scenario. The importance of individuality is routinely assumed and asserted in current culture. It already matters greatly to many (though perhaps not all) of us. Many people yearn to stand out, some despair that they don't, and go to great lengths to try to distinguish themselves in some way. Our response to the clean, hypothetical case of the Identicals helps us see that such aims, feelings, and sacrifices needn't be shallow or confused, nor are they really (just) driven by concern for other things.

Our core disquiet about the Identicals, I believe, remains in place even when we relax the scenario so that it involves only extreme similarity of the sort found in more familiar dystopian scenarios of this kind. And I think it largely remains in place even when we consider the "mere" gray uniformity of some actual totalitarian and traditional societies, though of course here other factors are also in play. Now our response to the uniformity of such lives directly supports only a claim about the importance of being distinct. To further hold that there is value for us not just in being

26. Williams suggests that friendship involves the thought that "he and his friend are different from each other." Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," 15.

distinct individuals, but also in *distinction*—in further ways of distinguishing ourselves from others—is to take a further step, since we can avoid blending into the nameless masses even if we don’t literally stand out.

I am nevertheless inclined to make this further step. Suppose you can either achieve something utterly unique, or do something that many other people have also accomplished, but that, considered on its own, counts as a greater achievement in terms of difficulty, complexity, or any other internal factor that might make an achievement more valuable. It seems to me, and I think many will agree, that we often have a reason to pursue the first achievement simply because it will distinguish us.²⁷ Still, my main aim here will be accomplished if I succeed in persuading you to accept only the weaker claim that it intrinsically matters that we are qualitatively different from each other.

III.

III.A. Relationships and Replaceability

The eponymous hero of Ishiguro’s recent novel *Klara and the Sun* is an intelligent “artificial friend” acquired by a mother, ostensibly as a companion to her sick and lonely daughter Josie but really—the hints from early on are so loud that this isn’t much of a spoiler—to learn how to closely mimic Josie so that, if and when she dies, Klara’s software could be transferred into another robotic body that is an exact copy of Josie’s, enabling Klara to replace her.

This plan horrifies the father who worries

“that science has now proved beyond doubt there’s nothing so unique about my daughter. . . . That people have been living with one another all this time, centuries, loving and hating each other, and all on a mistaken premise. . . . it feels like they’re taking from me what I hold most precious in this life.”²⁸

27. One author who will agree is Francis Bacon (see his “Of Honour and Reputation,” Michael Kiernan, ed. *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, Vol. 15 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 163–5), as will, I believe, Szymborska, Mill, Wilde and Nietzsche, to name just a few.

28. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 2021), 218.

The common unease at the idea of duplicate persons is often linked in this way to the worry that these duplicates will replace the original—or at least one another. Even if it would be morally wrong to sacrifice one of the Identicals for the sake of others, we may still worry that they are subject to such replacement in personal relationships. If genuine love and friendship require that those we deeply care about are irreplaceable, then it seems the Identicals cannot partake in such relationships, that they are literally unlovable.

Bernard Williams suggests something like this view when he writes that “[d]ifferences of character give substance to the idea that individuals are not inter-substitutable.”²⁹ This seems to imply that a lover can be substituted without loss by a qualitatively identical one. Parfit came closest to accepting such a view, notoriously holding that if one’s loved one was painlessly destroyed by a contraption that then produced an identical clone, not only should one’s love seamlessly transfer to the clone, but the procedure would involve no loss whatsoever.³⁰ The Identicals, however, aren’t causally related to each other in this way. They do have qualitatively identical memories of past events—of, say, romantic dinners or domestic arguments—but these memories are causally independent, and refer to parallel pasts. So even Parfit wouldn’t, I believe, hold that our Identicals are substitutable without loss.

In any event, many reject the view that Williams seems to imply. Frankfurt, for example, imagines a scenario where a young woman turns up who is qualitatively identical to one of his beloved daughters. He admits that he would find this bewildering, but insists that the existence of this clone shouldn’t lead him to conclude that

“I had all along been somehow wrong to love my daughter because I had erroneously supposed that there was no one quite like her. The reason it makes no sense for a person to consider accepting a substitute for his beloved is not that what he loves is qualitatively distinctive. It is just the fact of its particularity.”³¹

29. Williams, “Persons, Character, Morality,” 15.

30. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*.

31. Harry Frankfurt, “On Caring,” in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 169.

Frankfurt seems right (and Ishiguro's character wrong) that such an arrival won't reveal his love for his daughter to have been based on a mistake. And Frankfurt may also be right to reject the view that, without "differences of character," our loved ones would be substitutable. This is because our loved ones aren't just numerically distinct from their identical clones. They are different in a further way, by having a shared history with us that their clones do not have.

If we accept these claims, then the Identicals aren't replaceable without loss. If you love one of them, and she is switched with another in the middle of the night, you will notice no difference. But the Identical with whom you now share your bed isn't the woman you love, even if your life would have been exactly the same without the switch.

The idea of seamlessly replacing a dying child with her artificial clone remains chilling even if the parents recognize that this involves a loss. Still, we need to distinguish replacing one's lost loved one in this way—a temptation that can be resisted—from the mere availability of such a de facto replacement. We can agree that willingness to replace a lost loved one with a copy devalues the original relationship.³² But this hardly explains why it should matter that others exist who *could* practically replace those we care about. And if the mere possibility of replacement is the issue then this hardly singles out the Identicals: it's also true of you that you could be seamlessly replaced by your hypothetical doppelgänger.

So I don't think worries about replaceability can explain our disquiet about the Identicals. On reflection, this shouldn't be surprising: the scenario in no way involves anyone being replaced or threatened with replacement. It would remain bleak even if we stipulate that no such replacement will occur or even *could* occur. Moreover, we can also imagine the Identicals as utter loners or as monks who took a vow of silence. But their lives still seem bleak even when personal relationships aren't at issue.

Our disquiet about the Identicals cannot be explained in terms of their replaceability, or even as especially to do with the kinds of relationships they can form. But it doesn't follow that individuality doesn't matter in personal relationships.

32. When Schopenhauer's poodle would die, he would replace it with another—all named "Atma." When Barbara Streisand's poodle dies, it gets replaced by its genetic clone, though the clone at least gets a different name. I don't doubt Streisand feels sad when one of these poodles die. But how sad?

Philosophical discussion of replaceability usually follows Frankfurt in considering the sudden appearance of a single qualitatively identical individual—where this occurs against a familiar background of distinct individuals. But we can also ask what form personal relationships would take when the given background is one of mass duplication. Williams considers such a scenario involving multiple “token-persons,” though, unlike our Identicals, these are “printed off” from a prototype. In another contrast to the Identicals, Williams assumes that, since these token-persons do not have “intercommunicating experiences,” they will get increasingly dissimilar over time to eventually become “individual personalities.” Williams suggests that such divergence would be welcomed by someone who cares about one of these token-persons because “the more the [token persons] diverged, the more secure the hold the lover might feel he had on what particularly he loved.”³³ Williams thinks that the alternative would be to love, not any of these token-persons, but the type-person. He writes,

“We can see dimly what this would be like. It would be like loving a work of art in some reproducible medium. . . Much of what we call loving a person would begin to crack under this. . .”³⁴

Williams presumably assumes that each of these token-persons is substitutable, at least until the point where they significantly diverge. But Williams’s key point is compatible with Frankfurt’s view. We can still form an attachment to a particular token of a work of art. I can be deeply fond of my collapsing old copy of Dostoevsky’s *The Double*, I may refuse to replace it with a brand new one. But what I truly value is still the novel itself, and I especially value this particular token of it *as* a copy of *The Double*, with which I happen to have a distinctive history. We can similarly have a shared history with a particular person-token, and resist their replacement by another. But mere refusal to replace isn’t enough to give such an attachment the weight of relationships with genuine individuals.

Nor is refusal to replace the only measure of the weight possessed by a relationship. Consider also how one forms a relationship in the first place. Even when one’s feelings for someone arise spontaneously, forming a

33. Bernard Williams, “Are Persons Bodies?,” in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 64–81.

34. Ibid. at 81.

relationship with them still involves a potentially momentous choice. And looking back at such choices—and the accidents of fate that brought you together, and may have kept you apart—that initial choice seems of immense weight. But faced with a crowd of Identicals, there is no such momentous choice to be had. In fact, one cannot properly choose one as a friend or lover—one would just be arbitrarily picking one over another, an utterly weightless decision.³⁵ Looking back, and even accepting that one is especially attached to *this* numerically distinct identical, this would hardly look like a dramatic branching point in one's life.

Williams focuses on the perspective of someone who cares about a token-person. But try to imagine what it would be like to be such that others can value you, qua particular person, only in such a diminished, weightless kind of way—where there's nothing whatsoever at stake in engaging with you rather than any one of numerous others. (Being one of a kind vs. merely being one of *that* kind.) This loss of substance will also affect how you can value *yourself*, and the things you do, as well as whether there's still point in doing some of these things, in the face of such sideways repetition. And this is an effect that extends well beyond the context of personal relationships and attachment.³⁶

III.B. Ownership, Pride, and Making a Difference

Let's return to the Kantian idea of respect for persons. To refer to our fellow humans not by names but by numbers is often seen as a paradigm of dehumanization. But the Identicals help us see that the problem with such a practice isn't that it treats persons as mere objects: it would be perfectly appropriate to use numbers to distinguish the Identicals as, say, David₁, David₂, David₃, and so forth. They *are*, after all, distinct *only*

35. Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," *Social Research* 44, no. 3 (1977): 757–85.

36. If we are individuals, we can be valued as such, not merely as tokens in a series. Perhaps, you might wonder, what matters is being *regarded as* distinct, not being distinct *per se*. But if the Identicals suffer a misfortune, that doesn't depend on them, or anyone (including us, who are contemplating that scenario) seeing them as uniform. Nor would it help if they were under the illusion that they are unique (compare: an amnesiac Sisyphus). If you achieve something significant, it's a further good if you, and others, recognize this. But the achievement, and its value, stand independently of that further response. Similarly, if we are individual, this makes it possible to fittingly value us, and what we do, in ways that are sensitive to our individuality and which are, in consequence, themselves distinctive. But that further good depends on the prior value of individuality itself.

numerically.³⁷ So to number people needn't disrespect them as persons; it is rather a denial of their *individuality*—it is to treat individuals as if they were *merely* separate persons—as if they were Identicals, and not distinct individuals. The value of individuality to us just is, you might say, what is being subtracted when we are wrongly seen as just tokens in a series.

I doubt we can spell out this value in a way that doesn't heavily rely on prior intuitions and concerns. But to those who are already at least half-sympathetic, we can further elaborate it by tracing the links between individuality and other notions, such as our sense of ownership of, and the kind of pride we can feel in, our lives and the things we do.

Charles Taylor writes, and Sinatra croons, about a certain way of being that is *my way*.³⁸ But much of the magic of the possessive pronoun—our sense of ownership of what we do, and of our life as a whole, evaporates when it no longer refers to a distinctive way of being someone, and only to what is (and should be properly regarded *as*) an instance in a series.

It would therefore be odd, as well as misleading, for an Identical to proudly assert “I did it my way.” The Identical could of course still feel pride. They could still be proud, for example, that they “faced it all and stood tall.” But they cannot feel what we can call pride in distinction: the pride we can feel when we have done something unique, or done it uniquely.³⁹

Here is a grander way to make the point. We want it to matter, in some way, that we exist, and do the things we do. We want our existence to *make a difference*. One familiar way to make a difference is to affect the wider world around us such that, if we weren't here, or had acted differently, the surrounding world would have also been quite different. But as Nagel reminds us, it's true of most of us that it would have made little difference if we never came to exist.⁴⁰ Our wider impact is modest, at best.

The Identicals *can* make a great difference in this sense: imagine that the fate of the planet depends on each Identical accurately operating some elaborate machinery. While each of them would be making a momentous

37. Conversely, we regularly name even minimally distinctive inanimate objects.

38. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 29.

39. Hume held the stronger view that the object of pride *must* be “peculiar to ourselves, or at least common to us with a few persons.” Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge and P. H. Niddich (eds.) *David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 291.

40. Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 716–27.

wider difference, that difference is still uniform. So wanting to be different, and wanting to make a difference in this sense, are different things.

But our existence, who we are and what we do, can also make a difference in another, more literal sense: by bringing it about that *here*, the negligible spatio-temporal space each of us occupies, things *are* different than anywhere else.⁴¹ Perhaps it doesn't matter whether we came to exist in the first place. But now we have arrived we *can* say, looking back, that our particular existence, however humble, at least brings something to the world that cannot be found anywhere else.⁴² (Contrast the Identicals: seen one, seen them all.)

When people want to make a difference by changing the world in some way, they typically don't want to make just any kind of random wider difference. They typically want to make the world *better* in some way. I will now argue that something like this is also true of making a difference by being different. Not just any difference will do.

IV.

IV.A. Valuing Differences

Mill famously championed individuality. But the passages in *On Liberty* that sing its praises are often dismissed as glorifying pointless eccentricity. Leslie Stephen, one of Mill's earliest critics, already complained that "[t]hough goodness is various, variety is not in itself good."⁴³

We should agree that indiscriminate variety isn't in itself good. The Identicals' predicament would remain even if each had unique fingerprints, or number of hairs. Such differences are too trivial to make a real difference. Still, if goodness is various, we can hold that diversity in *goodness* is a further good. Or shifting to a personal focus: that the kind of differences that are valuable to us are precisely differences *in* (or, better,

41. The two ideas can be combined: we also want to make a *different* wider difference, if we can.

42. It can be tempting to spell this out in modal terms: had our parents had another child, that person, that life, would have been rather different. But on its own this modal claim doesn't really capture the main point. After all, it can also be true of the Identicals that, had *they* not come into existence, another set of *different* Identicals would have taken their place. Individuality is a relational, not a modal, property.

43. Leslie Stephen, "Social Macadamisation," *Fraser's Magazine*, August 1872, 150–68. For a more recent example of such criticism, see R. P. Anschutz, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953).

relating to) value. Individuality of the kind worth having is, on this interpretation, a kind of second-order value.

That we prize difference as a modality of value is reflected in many common evaluative terms. The Norwegian novelist Knausgaard writes that the thing that has kept him going for the whole of his adult life is “the ambition to write something exceptional,” and when this is threatened by the demands of mundane family life, then the thought that he has to escape “gnaws at [him] like a rat.”⁴⁴ To describe something as exceptional is to attribute to it great value in an absolute sense. But as the term itself indicates, this is not all it signifies. The exceptional is also an exception. Something of distinction, or distinguished, is distinct. The outstanding stands out. Conversely, a jarringly odd performance will stand out, it might be unforgettably bizarre, but it won’t count as a “standout performance.”

The idea, then, is that when something is valuable in some distinctive way, it can possess further value for us for that very reason; but merely being distinctive cannot, on its own, generate value out of nothing.⁴⁵ Now differences in value can go in both directions. The Zodiac Killer stands out. He is one of a kind, or at least one of a (thankfully) rare kind. Must we say that the Zodiac Killer’s creative homicidal modus operandi, embellished by bizarre ciphers and missives, benefited him by distinguishing him from all of us, even from other serial killers?

This is a familiar difficulty for accounts of well-being: think sadistic pleasures, malevolent desires, accomplishments pursued without conscience. Some respond by insisting on the distinction between what is good for a person, and what is morally good. It is a truism that these don’t always align. Others moralize well-being so that it excludes bad pleasures, desires, achievements. This is even easier to do in our case. That a pleasure is sadistic is extrinsic to its pleasantness, but distinct-

44. Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book 1: A Death in the Family*, trans. Don Bartlett (London: Vintage Books, 2012), 28.

45. It’s been similarly claimed that rarity matters only when applying to what already has value. See Shelly Kagan, “Rethinking Intrinsic Value,” *The Journal of Ethics* 2 (1998): 283. Matthes says this more directly: “That one thing is unlike another is only evaluatively significant when it is unlike another in a valuable way.” Erich Hatala Matthes, “History, Value, and Irreplaceability,” *Ethics* 124, no. 1 (2013): 35–64.

tive negative value is *negative* value. If for differences to be worth having they need to relate to value, it's easier to see why this should also exclude distinction that relates to, say, acts of radical (or banal) evil. And this point applies not only to moral value. Failing grotesquely where everyone else easily succeeds cannot distinguish us in a way worth having.

I said that Knausgaard aims to write something that is not only of great value, but of value that is different. It's natural to interpret this as aiming to write something that has *greater* value than that possessed by other works of fiction. If valuable difference is difference in value, then one way of cashing this out is in terms of difference in *amount* of value. A concern with individuality, understood in this way, can become a positional, even competitive matter.

I think that a concern with individuality can, in this way, help explain, perhaps even justify, at least some competitive motivations—motivations that are incredibly common but, absent this explanation, rather puzzling, even shameful. Why this absurd investment in outdoing others? (Or: “If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so obsessed with standing out?”) Such aims may seem unattractive, but here I think we need to resist the urge to overly moralize our account. We must distinguish the motive from the outcome: some things can be good for us even if aiming at them isn't always admirable. And we can distinguish ourselves by writing an exceptional novel even if our aim was just to write the best novel we can.

More importantly, though, having or creating *more* value than others is, if that's all it involves, a rather thin sort of difference. Luckily, there is a deeper form of individuality that doesn't require edging out others. We can also distinguish ourselves by realizing value in *different ways*. I'm not so sure that Knausgaard's autofiction is that great, but it's certainly unlike anything I've ever read. That there are other outstanding novels doesn't prevent it from standing out.

You might worry that if we can promote our individuality by, say, realizing knowledge or achievement in distinctive ways, the problem of trivial differences re-emerges, given that what distinguishes my achievement from yours might be utterly trivial. But the differences I have in mind are

those that bear on value: say, the distinctive difficulties I had to overcome to reach that summit, not the color of my socks.⁴⁶

A suggested counterexample: we can realize health in different ways—perhaps my immune system is unique, your lungs are extraordinary. But could such differences really promote our individuality?⁴⁷

For this to be a counterexample, we need to accept both that health is an intrinsic prudential good and that such differences do not matter as such. But with most of those who hold that well-being has objective dimensions, I find it hard to see health as intrinsically valuable. I suspect that if I did manage to think myself into the view that rude health is a supreme good, those internal difference would acquire more weight.

As this example illustrates, we cannot, on my view, assess whether certain differences are valuable without first assuming some prior axiology. If we seem to disagree about the kinds of differences worth having, we might be disagreeing, not about individuality and its value, but simply about value. You might draw another lesson: that for our differences to benefit us, they need to be connected to the self—to our lives, not merely to, say, what keeps us alive. I suspect that something like this is right even independently of this specific example: a random minor

46. It might be objected that my view nevertheless implies that we should have a range of unpleasant preferences: that we should wish, for example, that others were more similar to each other, so that we stand out more, or should want others to be less good, so that we would count as better. Or worse: wishing that *no* one would realize certain goods—that, for example, we were the only kind person. Now if other people became more similar that would, on my view, be bad for them. It would be even worse if people became less kind or literate, let alone if they became unkind or illiterate. We generally shouldn't wish serious harm to others even if this would benefit us. Here we should (and do) moralize. And there are many ways to be more individual that don't entail that others lose their positive or distinctive qualities. Even when distinction does have a positional element, it needn't support such unpleasant motives. If you want to stand out by winning, or being best at something, that does entail that others lose, or aren't as good. But it's not just that wishing that the other contestants would stumble is vicious; winning like this would also devalue the victory. Similarly, Knausgaard's aim to write an exceptional novel won't really be satisfied if other novelists were struck by an epidemic of mediocrity. That's a poor way to stand out. Even from the standpoint of individuality itself, it's better to do something that counts as exceptional even against the background of a rich literary scene. Recall the earlier contrast between rarity and individuality. Being the last human on Earth won't promote our individuality, and we'd similarly get little from being the only one to have ever composed a narrative, or from being the only righteous man in Sodom.

47. I'm grateful to an editor for raising this issue.

kindness toward a stranger on a train might stand out by dramatically affecting her life, yet this outcome (as opposed to the casual kindness) seems too distant from mine life or aims to really count toward my individuality. But I leave the task of spelling out such a further condition to another occasion.

For my purposes, it's more important that when we turn to more settled objective goods, it's easier to see how there can be value for us in realizing them in distinctive ways. The aesthetic domain is the most straightforward. To fully appreciate something's aesthetic value we need to make comparisons and contrasts with other things, and the significance here of the distinctive and original is obvious. As I have already suggested, achievement is another domain where we clearly value distinction, even if this is downplayed by current accounts of achievement.⁴⁸

Knowledge is less straightforward. There is only one truth, and the beliefs of the epistemically responsible will often overlap extensively. You can certainly stand out with your outlandish conspiracy theories, but that's not, on my view, a distinction worth having. And I promise I won't be disappointed if some of you come to share my view that individuality matters. But we can still differ in what we know, in how much we know, and in how we know. Think of the personal value of expertise, erudition, private information or first-hand knowledge.

We are fascinated by unusual relationships—by Bonnie and Clyde, or Sartre and de Beauvoir. But it's also true that personal relationships aren't the best place to seek great distinction (we sympathize with Knausgaard's kvetching about mundane family life). At the same time, individuality is central to close relationships with others. I don't just mean things like a couple's special song, the private language of siblings, or the sharing of intimate information withheld from others. As we saw earlier, to care deeply about someone is also to care about them *as* distinct individuals, and thus to appreciate and cherish their distinctive features (in this way, personal relationships involve a

48. Though they sometimes smuggle it in through the back door by, for example, associating the value of achievement with its difficulty, and defining difficulty relative to some population, pretty much making it inevitable that great achievements would also be highly distinctive.

third-order value); and this immediately means that each relationship is already unlike another.⁴⁹

Morality is more complicated. We don't distinguish ourselves by respecting others, or by being honest or fair. Moral transgression stands out more, we're often told about the allure and magnetism of evil (though most forms of wrongdoing are banal and repetitive). But this isn't the whole of morality. If there is space for supererogatory acts, or at least imperfect duties, there is also space for moral acts that are distinctive, or even stand out (even if directly aiming to out-sacrifice others is self-undermining); our moral heroes are often inimitable, they are hardly carbon copies of each other. Ethical theories that close up this space are inimical to individuality.

My main aim here is to argue that our individuality can be good for us as such. It suffices, for this purpose, to show that in at least some cases, differences from others that relate to value themselves possess value for us. If some evaluatively neutral differences are also valuable that isn't a problem for my main thesis; it would only reinforce it. But I am unable to find clear examples of this sort, though again our prior assumptions about value will bear on how we classify particular examples.

In his anti-autobiography, Roland Barthes offers a long list of his likes and dislikes. The things he likes include "salad, cinnamon, cheese, pimento, marzipan, the smell of new-cut hay. . ."⁵⁰ These preferences are part of what makes Barthes a distinct individual. The question, though, is whether they are the kind of differences that it is valuable to have—that

49. These ways in which individuality plays a role in personal relationships must be distinguished from another way in which we value uniqueness in that context. Think about the exclusivity of monogamy, or how we might cherish, say, the personal tradition of meeting a friend in a certain restaurant. Now that we are faithful to our partner doesn't distinguish our relationship from (many) others, and plenty of others might regularly meet in that rundown restaurant. These features of our relationships, and of our shared history with others, don't distinguish them, or us, from others. They distinguish certain *people* in relation to *us*. Parents can admittedly conflate the way their children are special *to them* from the ways they might be special, *period*. But we can easily distinguish the two, and many of us value the latter. The paired Identicals I described earlier do have specific shared histories, they love *this* Identical rather than another. But I've argued that such relationships nevertheless lack the full weight of relationships between distinctive individuals. And we, of course, value individuality outside personal relationships. Wilde stood out, and clearly *valued* standing out, regardless of his disastrous relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas.

50. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Vintage Books, 2020), 116.

are worth promoting or at least protecting. And it seems to me that, taken as a whole, such preferences do matter, to a degree. But this is because they constitute our unique aesthetic and hedonic sensibility. They are continuous, in this respect, with one's distinctive tastes in music or cinema, where the link to value is easier to see. And when we struggle to see any link to value, an unusual preference seems a mere eccentricity (Elvis was famously obsessed with deep-fried sandwiches filled with peanut butter, bananas, and bacon. . .)

You are blunt and expansive. I am skeptical and stubborn. A plausible account of individuality must account for the centrality of personality—if Wilde is a paradigm of extravagant individuality, this is surely in large part because of his larger-than-life character. But you might worry here that many of our traits are neutral—neither good nor bad.

There is a simple reply to this challenge. *We* are valuable, and our personality, the specific manner (say, extrovert or introvert) in which we engage with the world, is the distinctive way in which each of us realizes the value of personhood. But if you think that this is too easy, I can add that when it makes sense to feel pride in our distinctive character, the link to value actually seems straightforward. There are many ways to be charming or funny, warm or honest, curious, persistent, creative—and I don't think I need to spell out the central role of such traits in realizing goods such as personal relationships, moral virtue, knowledge, achievement, and aesthetic appreciation and creation.

IV.B. Counting Differences

An account of individuality needs to tell us which differences from others possess value.

We also need to determine the set of relevant people—I'll touch on that below. But that would still leave us with the question of how to aggregate these differences to determine a given person's overall degree of individuality. We also need to spell out how individuality translates into prudential value, and how to weigh that value against

other aspects of well-being (how much fun should we sacrifice to be distinct?).⁵¹

There is more than one way to do all that. But here is one approach I find promising. We can start by comparing a given person to each of the other people in the set. On my view, we need to compare only those differences that relate to value. We saw that these can be both with respect to degree and with respect to form. Consider form first. I have my style, you have yours. Our difference here is symmetrical. The more different we are from each other, the greater the “difference quotient” between us. However, if your style is more unique, you will get a high difference score when we compare you to all other writers, while I won’t. You will end up far more individual, on this feature, than others.

Differences in terms of degree aren’t symmetrical in this way. You are masterful on the piano. Others only play a rudimentary tune. I cannot play any instrument. You are different from us, and this advances your individuality in proportion to the difference in value. By contrast, we get nothing, in respect of individuality, from this particular comparison. For better or worse, here valuable differences are positional.

I also argued, however, that difference in degree is thinner—that it was better for Knausgaard to rethink the idea of the novel than to write an even better conventional novel. If so, then difference in degree should count for less, in respect of individuality.

Turn next to the question of how to add up these pairwise comparisons.⁵² Suppose we simply aggregate them to form an overall individuality

51. Such an account will also need to reply to Goodman’s critique of similarity as philosophically useless because how alike things are “depends not only upon what properties they share, but upon who makes the comparison, and when. . .” (Nelson Goodman, “Seven Strictures on Similarity,” in his *Problems and Projects* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill/Hackett, 1972), 445). But if similarity is “useless,” then many routine philosophical claims (e.g., about similarities between possible worlds) would also be in trouble. See Lieven Decock and Igor Douven, “Similarity After Goodman,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2011): 61–75. And applied to individuality, Goodman’s critique is blunted by the restriction to differences relating to value.

52. We differ from each other in different ways. Why assume that these differences can be added up together to form an overall measure of individuality? It is true that our interest in what distinguishes someone can be rather focused. We can admire Glenn Gould as an unparalleled pianist without having any interest in his eccentric personality. But even here we’re already implicitly adding up different ways in which Gould was an original—his groundbreaking approach to Bach, unusual technique, revolutionary ideas about the role of the audience. . . And we also, I believe, often evaluate individuality in a more global sense. You may know Hedy Lamarr as one of the greats of 20th century cinema. But if I tell you that

score. On this model, if you're the only one in the set—the last human on Earth—we cannot speak about your individuality. As we saw when we contrasted rarity and individuality, this is the right result. And the more people in the set, the greater the potential for individuality. This also seems right.⁵³

On the simplest model, the prudential value of difference would be a linear function of this score, starting at zero difference and steadily climbing up. On this view, it's better to be us than to be an Identical, and even better to be Wilde than to be us.

Some would dismiss the second contrast. What matters, they'd say, is that we are properly distinct, that we don't blend into the nameless masses. If distinctness matters but distinction does not, we can draw a threshold, and deny prudential value to further differences beyond it. This seems to me wrong. We do, and should, value further differences between us. But we can hold on to the idea that distinctness is more important than distinction. Instead of drawing such a threshold, we can see the function from difference to value as curved, with initial differences having greater weight, with even greater individuality still adding to our good, but in increasingly smaller increments.

Even when they emphasize distinctness over distinction, the models we discussed so far see individuality as a positive good, which the Identicals utterly lack. They don't take the idea of the "evil of not being unique" literally. Moreover, on these models discovering that you share this world with your doppelgänger would barely dent your individuality. But it's disturbing to discover that such a double exists, it's at least a threat (if not a decisive one) to one's individuality, a threat that the Identicals scenario amplifies manifold.

We should, I believe, take Valéry's phrase literally. But if lack of distinctness is a form of ill-being, the comparison with our doppelgänger should yield, not zero, but a negative score. The Identicals

Lamarr also invented a radio guidance system, or that she daringly escaped from her domineering fascist husband, and later married her divorce lawyer, don't you conclude, with me, that she was even *more* extraordinary than you had realized? And in her secluded later years, it would be appropriate for Lamarr to feel overall pride in the multiple ways that her life was distinctive, or to wonder whether, by prioritizing acting over science, she had missed an opportunity to achieve even greater distinction.

53. We can also stipulate that you get no positive difference score with respect to dimensions of value that only you realize (cf. fn. 48).

suffer this evil most acutely, but extreme similarity is still bad, if better, and we're relieved from this evil only if we are sufficiently distinct, at which point further individuality becomes a benefit. We can hold on to the curve I described above, but on this more complex model we do need to add a threshold, and below it our line needs to go below zero. How far below zero that line goes will help determine whether dealing with a doppelgänger or two, or belonging to a uniform group in a diverse society, can actually drag us below the threshold of distinctness. And the model doesn't rule out that one *can* become more individual (up to a point) by becoming more similar to some people who are themselves very different from most others.

IV.C. Weighing Differences

Two roads, one less traveled. We can now also say more on when, exactly, we should choose an option simply because it would differentiate us in some way.

The restriction to value already rules out many such choices: if there isn't already something to be said for taking a certain route, it doesn't matter how many took it before us. And we most certainly have no reason to march into the foliage in a Pythonesque silly walk.

Even when there is something to be said for both options, the view isn't that we should be constantly on the lookout for ways to differentiate ourselves from others. To begin with, as in the case of pleasure, trying too hard is often self-defeating. And some areas offer less space for individuality, whether in principle or because of the limits of our own talents or opportunities. We are therefore more invested in promoting our individuality in some domains, not at all in others; and this is fortunate since, by differing from each other in *where* we aim to differ, we are more likely to achieve our aim.

Even more obviously, what we can call reasons of difference typically compete with many other reasons. Reasons to get somewhere on time, or to see a landmark even if that means joining the tourist crowd. So we often should do as others do. And in plenty of cases—think of the mother mimicking an infant's smile, the synchronized

dancer, or the reader of the *Haggadah*—we should do as others do *in order* to be like others.⁵⁴

But there are also enough cases where we should aim at difference. On the weakest view, reasons of difference serve only as tie-breakers: we have a reason to take the road less traveled by only when both routes are otherwise equally good. This, however, seems too weak when we consider those below the threshold of distinctness. The Identicals, I said, have reason to differentiate themselves even at considerable cost. The tie-breaker view is more appealing when we turn to distinction; if individuality is only a tie-breaker once we rise about the threshold, this will blunt its competitive edge. This, however, still seems to me too weak. As discussed earlier, I think we can be justified in opting for a somewhat lesser achievement that would set us apart, or in choosing to write something more original that we expect to also be more flawed. But as we saw, we can draw our curve such that as we move further away from distinctness, the value of further difference declines, giving us something that begins to approximate a mere tie-breaker.

v.

V.A. As Good as Identical?

To deny that individuality has intrinsic personal value is to deny that our differences from each other make us better off than the Identicals. But that could be true even if we accept that individuality matters. When Wilde quips that “most people are other people,” he is implicitly dismissing the difference between us and the Identicals from the other direction, so to speak. Schopenhauer similarly argued that most human lives seem “empty and meaningless” when viewed from the outside, in part because

54. Though we shouldn’t overlook the element of individuality that can be present even when it seems to matter little. We don’t doubt for a second that, although that Hollywood movie was seen by millions of others, our specific experience of it is at least somewhat distinct—and we’ll often be quite invested in our own individual slant on it, however modest. Moreover, we often cultivate our individuality not by being utterly different in each thing we do, but by combining common activities and experiences in a distinctive pattern. How many out there have solved this chess puzzle, saw that action flick, *and* cooked that fricassé?

“Every time a man is begotten and born the clock of human life is wound up anew, to repeat once more its same old tune that has already been played innumerable times. . . with insignificant variations.”⁵⁵

Knausgaard recently put this view more bluntly, writing that

“we are brought up to believe we are unique and genuinely assert our own selves whenever we utter or do something, whereas in actual fact we are as good as completely alike, as good as identical. . .”⁵⁶

Knausgaard speculates that we try to conceal this crushing truth since confronting it would “pulverize any conception [we have] of what we might be.”

On this depressing view, we are so similar that we’re “as good as identical”—or as bad off as the Identicals. If this is correct then the fantasy of the Identicals is merely our exaggerated reflection. The horror we feel about them is really directed at us.

The thought here couldn’t plausibly be that, although we are different, the differences between us are trivial, in the sense of relating to nothing of value. Many are, but surely some are not. But we can interpret the Wildean as claiming that although some of the differences between us do matter, they are insignificant in the sense of not being quite enough. Now if the discussion so far has achieved anything, then the suggestion that we’re literally no better than the Identicals must be false. But the Wildean could reply that this is compatible with us not being different enough (from others and, therefore, from the Identicals) to escape the evil of not being unique.⁵⁷

Wilde at least implies that at least some people, presumably himself included, are exceptional enough to be an exception. We can interpret him as saying that to escape the evil of nonuniqueness we need to be

55. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 321–2.

56. Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book 6: The End*, trans. Don Bartlett (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019), 485–491.

57. We can interpret the Wildean as drawing a far more demanding threshold for distinctness. But we can also read them as flipping the curve I described earlier, such that small differences matter for little, and differences begin to really make a difference only when they are spectacular.

special in a more demanding, and perhaps inherently exclusive, sense. The Wildean argues that when people are viewed on a grander scale, the differences between human lives begin to blur, and we need to be exceptionally distinguished to even be distinct. But it's hard to see why we should stop at this Wilde's-eye view without continuing to the more inclusive view of *Ecclesiastes* (1:10) that "all is vanity" because "there is nothing new under the sun." If the view from a distance is the true test of difference, why not step even further back? But if distance blurs difference, from a far enough distance even Wilde is just a minor variation on an age-old type of flamboyant character, and his work merely a repetition of themes as old as Homer. Perhaps in the end the author of *Ecclesiastes* is right that if we step back far enough (to the perspective of a Martian?), in the end all we'll see are the familiar narrative patterns of human life repeated many billions of times over.

Now Wilde implicitly contrasts himself, and other extravagantly individual personalities, with people like you and me. But the bleaker *Ecclesiastes* view must also involve a contrast: between "insignificant variations" of humanity and what exactly? A one-of-a-kind sensory system or alien mode of reasoning? But if we take the visual metaphor literally, then even a super-duper Other (pardon my French) will blur into the crowd from a sufficient distance (and if so, then what *would* count as a significant difference?). It's a familiar point that when we step back far enough then human life can seem meaningless, absurd, and insignificant.⁵⁸ To these we can now add: utterly uniform.

If take the visual metaphor literally—but we shouldn't. A broader view of something needn't involve a blurring out; if anything, a more encompassing view of the differences between people should involve not a zooming out but a zooming in. We still need to draw that line between dreary uniformity and adequate difference, and I'm not entirely sure that all of us will fall on the right side. Large stretches of our lives really are generic (butter that bread, change that diaper), our consciousness often a stream of clichés. Still: once we set aside the visual metaphor, and keep in mind the distinction between distinctness and distinction, then seeing us as merely notionally better than the Identicals betrays a failure of attention, even a whiff of misanthropy (compare: "All Asians look alike"). There's enough difference of substance to mark us as genuinely distinct

58. Nagel, "The Absurd."

individuals. Some—the Wildes and Woolfs—tower over us. They are far more unlike anyone around them. But many people are more cheerful than me, and some seem to reach heights of ecstatic bliss I'll never experience. Yet it hardly follows that I am unhappy. In the same vein, most of us are unique enough (distinct) even if we aren't superlatively special (distinguished). We may still feel depressed that we're not f-ing special in this further way, but that's not the same as the depressing view being true.

This discussion leads us to a question I have sidestepped so far: if difference matters, difference from whom, exactly? The all-encompassing perspective assumed by the depressing view implicitly answers: everyone, across time. Another way to resist the depressing view is to reply that the only differences that matter are those from our social surrounding. But I'm not sure about this move, nor do I know how to circumscribe the relevant milieu in a non-arbitrary way. It will suffice to note that similar issues about scope also arise, for example, in connection with views that ascribe intrinsic value to equality. In any event, we saw that even the grander view needn't erase our individuality. It may even increase it. At least us moderns have the privilege of living lives unlike any lives lived by any prior generations, and unlikely to be repeated by any that will follow.

V.B. Individuality as Novelty

Imagine a rural community. Two, three hundred years ago. Fixed roles for people, the patterns of life repeating themselves again and again, within and between lives. Success often *just is* precisely repeating your predecessors. Deviation frowned upon, even severely punished. How most of humanity passed its days, until about a moment ago. As a central cultural motif or common concern, preoccupation with individuality is incredibly recent. That's right: but so is concern with autonomy, equality, even personal happiness. Still, the desire to stand out, or at least not blur in, is hardly a recent invention.

Writing Board 5645 in the British Museum is called "Complaints of Khakheperaseneb." It is an ancient Egyptian text (ca. 2055–1650 BC) that goes like this:

If only I had unknown utterances
and extraordinary verses,

in a new language. . .
 free from repetition,
 without a verse of worn-out speech
 spoken by the ancestors!
 I shall wring my body for what is in it. . .
 For what is already said can only be repeated;
 what is said once has been said. . .⁵⁹

For all we know, Khakheperraseneb complaint about repetition was the first of its kind, itself an original “unknown utterance,” and therefore self-defeating. But he was certainly not the last to complain in this way. His complaint is echoed by the more famous, and more categorical, assertion of the much later author of Ecclesiastes. And the extravagant projects of past elites surely reflect a similar investment in distinction, *sans* the pessimism.⁶⁰ Moreover, we can find the drive to diverge even in the most controlling communities. The Hutterites enforce complete conformity and subservience. But a careful observer will spot traces of resistance: women who gradually alter their clothing in subtle ways over time in the hope that their “haughtiness” won’t be spotted.⁶¹

It remains the case, it might be objected, that rural life—that the lives of most pre-moderns—exhibited limited individuality. Even if Wilde is wrong, and the differences between at least some of us suffice to genuinely distinguish *us*, do we really want to say that all those past lives were seriously deficient, that all these people suffered the misfortune of not being unique? I think that just as we accept that very many past lives were seriously lacking in autonomy, we should similarly accept that many were also lacking in individuality, even if good in other respects. But we

59. Gerald E. Kadish, “British Museum Writing Board 5645: The Complaints of Khakheper-Re’-Senebu,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 (1973), 77–90.

60. I don’t have in mind here only pyramids and hanging gardens but also, for example, the exquisite sensibility displayed in the idiosyncratic lists of Sei Shōnagon’s *Pillow Book* (~1000 AD); Shōnagon was acutely aware that she “praise[d] things that others condemn” (Sei Shōnagon, *The Pillow Book*, trans. Meredith McKinney (New York: Penguin Classics), 255–6).

61. Hannah Kienzler, *Gender and Communal Longevity Among Hutterites: How Hutterite Women Establish, Maintain, and Change Colony Life* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2005), 98.

shouldn't exaggerate the uniformity of rural life. The inquisitor investigating the little village of Montailou in the early 1300s had doubts about the orthodoxy of the colorful characters he interrogated, but he couldn't seriously question their individuality.⁶² One other difference from the Identicals is that here the observed uniformity reflects a clear moral wrong: when an inquisitor punishes deviance, or a Hutterite elder upbraids a woman for ironing her skirt in a distinctive way, they aren't just disrespecting autonomy, they are also suppressing individuality.

VI. CONCLUSION

Williams ends *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* with a kind of summary statement of the book: he has given us an argument for the "primacy of the individual and of personal dispositions." Given that there *are* such individuals with dispositions of character, this primacy is a kind of "necessary truth"—but Williams concedes that it is only necessary barring "drastic technological changes such as cloning, pooling of brainstores, and so on."⁶³ In an earlier paper he similarly wrote that "the significance given to individuality in our own and others' lives. . . would certainly change if there were not between people indefinitely many differences which are important to us."⁶⁴

I have tried to give substance to these claims by exploring a scenario where these differences have been removed. Williams wants to say that our existing differences are a precondition for our caring about individuality in the way we do. But this is compatible with regarding the Identicals with horror. I have argued that individuality in the sense of the differences between us has intrinsic value, that it is good for us to be different from others—at least so long as these differences relate to what is already valuable.

Individuality can seem in tension with morality. Morality says: "Don't make an exception of yourself," individuality says the opposite.⁶⁵ But the restriction to differences in what has independent value reveals this

62. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montailou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324*, trans. Barbara Bray (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980).

63. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 201.

64. Williams, "Persons, Character, and Morality," 15.

65. Nietzsche thought that Kantian universalization is incompatible with genuine individuality. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 188–9.

tension to be largely illusory: worthwhile ways of standing out must stay within moral bounds, and even moral acts can stand out. And I mentioned in passing that individuality is in fact associated with distinctive kinds of moral wrong: we can wrong others by repressing their individuality, or by treating them in ways that ignore it. Taking individuality seriously has further ramifications I can only gesture at. Everyone knows that individuality was a key plank in Mill's case for liberalism, but much of the force of that line of argument is lost, I believe, when it gets translated into claims about autonomy or self-realization rather than about the personal value of difference itself. For humans to flourish, they need opportunities (even equal opportunities) to cultivate their individuality—opportunities to engage with a sufficient range of valuable options that would allow them to distinguish themselves in worthwhile ways. Some appeal to autonomy to defend similar conclusions.⁶⁶ But seeing valuable options as enabling us to freely choose, where that choice may as well be uniform, and seeing them as vehicles for distinctness, are very different aims.⁶⁷

NOTES ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

Guy Kahane is Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Oxford, Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy at Pembroke College, Oxford, and Director of Studies at the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics.

66. See, e.g., Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Though individuality may distinctly support the promotion of competitive schemes, including, and especially, competition for distinction via valuable novelty.

67. Seeing difference as valuable can also lend powerful support to the idea I started with, that we should respect, even celebrate, difference. Repressing difference harms individuals, and a more diverse society also offers more opportunities to cultivate difference. But the account of individuality defended here is, well, resolutely individual. When cultural diversity goes along with strict uniformity within each cultural group, it offers little in terms of individuality.