**IDENTIFICATION ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY**

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**Abstract:** This article explores a form of ethics and spirituality based on the nearly universal but often undeveloped human capacity for identifying self with others and with non-personal values. It begins with commonplace non-moral identification experiences, then describes identification with others in ethical and spiritual unions. Freud’s psychological emphasis on identification is linked with ethics and spirituality, though Freud would have objected. Robert S. Hartman’s three kinds of goodness—systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic—are applied to abundant ethical and spiritual living through identification. Intrinsic identification with intrinsic values is the highest moral ideal; intrinsic identification with ultimate reality and with goodness in all its forms is the highest spiritual ideal.

**Introduction**

Robert S. Hartman thought that identifying ourselves completely with something we value highly is the most basic and general form of intrinsic evaluation. Just what this means will become clearer as this discussion proceeds. Consider first this quote from Hartman.

In the intrinsic dimension all intrinsic selves are one. Identification with the other is the very core of this reality....People in contact with this realm are self-actualizing, in Maslow’s sense, and have the capacity, as Viktor Frankl and others have shown, to survive the most horrible experiences. They summon their inner resources. Within themselves, they are one with their beloved ones, and through identification with others and with the world, they become united with themselves. (Hartman 2006, 137)

When we identify strongly with anything or anyone, we somehow become one or united. The other becomes an integral part of who we are, of our own personal identity. But what does this really mean? We can be “one” with another in many different ways. To answer, we will begin with some familiar non-moral identification experiences, then move into a deeper understanding of identification itself. This will take us into the moral and religious significance and scope of identification in axiological ethics and spirituality.

**Familiar Non-Moral Identification Experiences**

Most of us are born with the capacity to identify ourselves with something we value very highly, ranging from ourselves and our earliest caregivers to something beyond. Usually we do this only half consciously, at best. Yet, we can bring common identification-of-self-with-another experiences more clearly into focus, then begin to grasp their full axiological, moral, and spiritual significance. From birth, maybe even before, good mothering or parenting fosters our ability to identify with and attach ourselves to others, as attachment theory psychologists indicate. Franz de Waal, the primatologist, says that identification is one of everyone’s earliest and most basic human abilities.

If identification is the ability to feel closer to one object in the environment than another, and to make the situation of the first to some extent one’s own, this is a very basic ability indeed. It makes it possible to reach out mentally to others, making them an extension of the self, paying close attention to their situation so as to influence it or gain information from it. Identification underlies both empathy and imitation. The precision with which one individual can copy the behavior of another depends on the degree to which that individual is able to assume the other’s point of view (another way of saying that the level of imitation depends on the level of empathy). (de Waal 1992, 71-72)

Most people have many brief identification experiences. Almost everyone does, whether they recognize it or not. We usually give our identification moments very little thought and have no adequate conceptual framework for understanding them. Not all identification experiences are ethical or spiritual in nature. We can and do identify with many kinds of things. As inherently social beings, most of our early identification experiences are social in nature, but without reaching the level or complexity of ethics and spirituality. According to de Waal, language learning through imitation involves identification. From everyday experiences of social union, more profound and enduring moral-spiritual unions can grow, but not all social bonding is moral bonding. We often intrinsically evaluate things that are not intrinsically valuable, and we often intensely value and identify with people for non-moral reasons.

Consider a few familiar examples of mostly non-moral identification experiences. We may identify intensely with our favorite athletes or sports teams. Watching our favorite sports on TV or in person can be ecstatic, all absorbing, and self-transcending. Identifying with our players or teams can be so complete that their strengths, skills, and successes magically become our own. When our favorite athletes or teams win, we win; when they are “# 1,” we are “# 1.” When they lose, we are ego-deflated losers. (This may happen also with rock stars, and even with politicians!)

When we attend large-scale sporting events like football, basketball, or baseball games, we often experience a deep sense of social union or bonding with hundreds or thousands of other friendly spectators, and with our own team members, but probably not with the competition. When we watch Superbowl and other championship games on TV, we do not like to watch them alone. We go to parties or sports bars to watch them because we highly value the profound experiences of immediate social union and bonding that occur in such contexts. Such experiences of intrinsic social union, solidarity, and belonging may actually be much more intense and profound than anything that ever transpires in religious services.

By degrees, we identify with many different social groups, defined or understood in a great variety of ways. Criteria for social memberships are seldom crystal clear. Early pre-historic human beings identified primarily with their own small nomadic hunter/gatherer clans or tribes. At that time, there were no villages, cities, or countries, as we know them. Belonging to a village, city, or nation state is integral to who *we* are, but not to who *they* were. Today we identify closely with modern civil units that are of relatively recent historical origin, given the long course of human history.

In our intensely patriotic or nationalistic moments, we often experience profound unity with others. In the United States, we do this on special days of national significance like Dec. 7th (Pearl Harbor Day), July 4th, (Independence Day), D-day (WWII Invasion of Europe Day), and Memorial Day at the end of May. At such times, the triumphs and failures of our country, its history, its leaders, and its heroes, are experienced as our own personal triumphs or failures. Correspondingly, national trials and tribulations like the 9/11, 2001, Twin Towers catastrophe, the 8/28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans, and current and often-repeated terrorist attacks happen vicariously to all of us by identification, not just to their immediate victims. Internationally, many of us identified with Paris after the Nov. 13, 2015, terrorist massacres. Earlier, after the Jan. 7, 2015, massacre in Paris, identification was expressed as, “*Je suis Charlie*,” (I am Charlie Hebdo). In the Muslim world, identification was with the desecrated Mohammed. After March 22, 2016, it was “*Je suis Brussels*.”

Anything or anyone with which we identify ourselves partly constitutes and becomes an ingredient of our own personal identity. Robert S. Hartman distinguished three different kinds of value, systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic, and we may fully identify ourselves with any or all of them. We may identify ourselves with systemic concepts, thoughts, beliefs, doctrines, formal systems, institutions, and ritual or social forms, conventions, and institutions. We may identify ourselves with our extrinsic wealth, prosperity, health, possessions, social status, personal and professional roles, as well as with our beautiful bodies, clothes, and adornments, our practical talents, our athletic or physical abilities, our recreations and hobbies, our work and worksites, or our homes and places of origin or residence. Artists and art lovers may intensely concentrate upon and identify with the physical works of art they are creating, experiencing, or enjoying aesthetically. Writers and composers become one with their own poems, books, articles, or music; and their readers and hearers may identify keenly with their literary or musical works. Identification with systemic and extrinsic values is neither inherently moral nor immoral, though it may become either, depending on the larger ethical context in which it appears. We also may identify with unique intrinsically valuable individuals or centers of consciousness, thinking, feeling, doing, choosing, and valuing—as in identification ethics. Our systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic values are ideally in harmony. At times they are, but when they conflict, we ought always to give persons priority over mere things or mere thoughts. “Ought” in axiology means, “This would be best, so do it!” (Edwards 2010, 134-135).

Sadly, in our relations with persons, we often identify with social or moral evils, vices, villains, aggressors, terrorists, and abusers, instead of with moral goodness, virtues, heroes, peacemakers, and saints. We may identify with racism, sexism, antisemitism, islamophobia, and prejudices of all kinds. We identify with corrupt politicians. Many Germans once identified with the Nazis. Many people now identify with violent religious fanatics and terrorists. Captives and victims of abuse come to identify themselves with their captors and abusers. Co-dependent individuals may identify in harmful ways with others who are harmful. Some varieties of religious identification are pernicious, as in Satan worship, religious terrorism, dogmatism, and fanaticism. In much of today’s youth culture, bad is good, and far too many young people identify with evil role models, not with good ones. Many current television programs, movies, media, and popular songs glorify villains, not heroes and saints, and far too many of us, younger and older, identify with bad people who do bad things. Not all identification-with-another experiences are desirable. Like all other good things, our capacity for identification (intrinsic evaluation) can be misused. Still, there are many positive, healthy, desirable, and ethically appropriate ways of depending on and relating to others for aspects of our own identity and meaning. We are or have relational or interdependent realities.

Ethically, we should never identify *completely* with everything (both bad and good) within universal human nature, or within ourselves or others as individuals, for example, the undesirable tribal provincialism, biases, and hatreds we inherited from our distant hunter/gatherer ancestors or from our corrupt contemporary cultures, and the past evil choices we have made for ourselves. Our early ancestors were highly competitive, nomadic, tribal, hunter-gatherers for eons of time before they settled down into highly competitive agricultural villages. Much of the time, we are not far removed from tribalism today. The undesirable evolutionary baggage of tribalism is a significant part of universal human nature, and it manifests itself today in all the distinctions we make between morally worthy “insiders” and morally unworthy “outsiders.” Sadly, we live too much of the time by such distinctions. Sometimes, “follow nature” is very bad moral advice!

Killing other people in war may, at times, be the morally right thing to do, the lesser of many evils. Yet, “War is hell,” as General Sherman well knew. Surprisingly, killing in combat can also be a kind of negative demonic mystical identification experience, as is well explained by combat veteran Karl Marlantes in his, *What it is Like to Go to War*. Provincialism makes killing easier. “Basic training is oriented toward eliminating the enemy’s humanity” (Marlantes, 232), and “Warriors will almost always kill with the conviction, at the time of killing, that the enemy is not human” (232-233). Military training also induces intense identification with members of one’s own platoon, squad, crew, team, or immediate military unit. Says Marlantes, combat experience resembles mystical transcendence in intensity, ecstasy, and in many other ways (7-8, 233, 255-256). As for negative identification, during the experience of killing and destroying in combat, “There is a deep savage joy in destruction, a joy beyond ego enhancement. Maybe it is loss of ego. I’m told it’s the same for religious ecstasy” (63). There is also a powerful positive identification with the compatriots in one’s own combat unit, a “total focus on the present moment, the valuing of other people’s lives above one’s own and being part of a larger religious community” (7). “This too is a form of transcendence. I was we, no longer me” (175). “The loss of this ‘I’ is, according to most mystical traditions, the way to ecstasy, but it can also be the way to horror” (235).

Identifying with anyone’s demonic, provincial, harmful, evil, vicious, and conflicting interests, choices, and actions is undesirable, but we ought to be very careful about attributing evil to others. “Judge not that ye be not judged,” Jesus said. Usually we judge ourselves more accurately than we judge others, though not always, as psychological counselors and therapists well know. Self-knowledge involves an awareness of our own evil propensities, beliefs, choices, and actions. We must acknowledge them as our own and as integral aspects of who we really are. But we should not positively value, affirm, approve of, and perpetuate our own imperfections, the evil and undesirable parts of ourselves. Repentance, guilt, and regret are desirable negative self-valuations when they are appropriate. We are both our bad-making and our good-making properties, but we should not positively identify with and approve of the worst that is in us (or in others).

Obviously, not all identification experiences are moral in nature. Some are downright immoral. Some are quite horrible, yet ecstatic, as Marlantes indicated. Marlantes concluded his vivid and unforgettable description of what it is like to go to war with, “What ultimately will save us from the appeal of war is achieving this transcendence and intensity though other means. The substitute for war is not peace: peace is a seldom-achieved political state of being. The substitutes are spirituality, love, art, and creativity, all achievable through individual hard work” (256).

This brings us to identification ethics, then to identification spirituality, as positive “other means” of identifying with others.

**Moral Identification with Others**

For the time being, environmental ethics and our ethical relations with and toward animals will not be addressed while we concentrate on “others” who are human beings. Identification ethics will first be applied to individual persons having all their specific determinate qualities and relations, including both their shared or universal humanity and everything unique to or distinctive of themselves. Ethics eventually extends far beyond inter-human relations, as indicated later, and merges with profound spirituality.

So, considering human beings ethically, *What* should we value most for and about people? And *How* should we evaluate such excellences? Identification ethics says that (1) the highest or most valuable objects of value on earth are ourselves and other unique human persons, though we are not the only legitimate objects of great or intrinsic value; and (2) the best way to evaluate all people is through intense personal identification with them, though this is not the only legitimate way to evaluate others and ourselves. *As unique persons, we are intrinsically valuable; we are ends in, to, and for ourselves.* We are not valuable merely extrinsically as means to ends or goals beyond ourselves, though at times it is morally acceptable so to consider us—as long as our intrinsic worth is first affirmed and protected. We can be both useful to self and others and valuable in, to, and for our own sakes. As Kant indicated, we can be considered as means, but not *merely* as means. Non-personal good things are valuable mainly as useful means to ends (extrinsic value objects, processes, and activities), or as mental ideas or constructs (systemic value objects).

Robert S. Hartman defined “morality” as “the application of intrinsic value to persons” (Hartman, 1991, 194). If this means nothing more than identifying profoundly with persons as intrinsically valuable, it is much too narrow to cover what philosophers and ordinary people mean by “ethics” or “morality.” Identification ethics is not the whole of ethics. There are many diverse ethical theories and practices. Identification ethics is merely the best of the lot, where “best” means “richest in goodness,” as Hartman explained (Edwards 2010, 20-22). Obviously, this claim requires considerable explanation and justification, so consider this.

*Some ethical theories are better than others.* Very few moral philosophers would say this explicitly, though in arguing against alternative views they affirm it implicitly. Most ethical theories make a place of some kind for systemic values such as moral laws, rules, commandments, and imperatives, for extrinsic goods like useful possessions, processes, and actions that have desirable consequences, and for intrinsic values of some kind such as persons, animals, God, or repeatable abstractions like beauty, pleasure, virtue, or knowledge (Edwards 2010, 145-170; and Edwards 2014, 182-205). They differ considerably; however, with respect to which of these are the most fundamental. Their significance may be ranked in accord with what they take to be most basic in ethics.

Kantian and some Natural Law theories, for example, hold that morality is grounded in systemic values, and that right acts are simply those that conform to moral laws, rules, or imperatives. Only moral rules and actions for the sake of moral rules are good without qualification or in themselves. Persons are valuable only as instances of or containers for moral imperatives.

Utilitarian or consequentialist theories ground morality extrinsically in external public actions that do the most good. They also make a subordinate place for abstract guidelines or rules that show us how to do this effectively, and for some theory of intrinsic goodness that identifies things worthwhile “for their own sakes.” Normally, consequentialist theories do not recognize the intrinsic worth of unique persons. Instead, they offer *abstractions like beauty, adventure, pleasure, happiness, reason, honesty, knowledge, truth, virtues, desire or interest fulfillment*, etc., as intrinsic goods. They propose that right actions are those that do the most good. Individual persons are valuable only as useful receptacles for intrinsic goods like pleasure, knowledge, virtue, etc.

Intrinsic identification ethics grounds morality and right actions in the virtue of identifying intensely with concrete, definite, unique, individual persons. Right actions are the ones that issue from identifying positively with persons, others and ourselves, when we are well informed. Only unique persons or centers of consciousness, thought, feeling, choice, action, and evaluation have intrinsic worth. External desirable-because-useful things have extrinsic worth. Many desirable internal properties and relations are “good for us” values. So which kind of theory is best?

Careful consideration suggests that moral laws and guidelines are valuable only because they tell us how people who fully identify with others would normally act, but they are not valuable as final ends in, to, and for themselves (as Kant thought). They are to be obeyed for our sake, not for their own sake. People have more worth than abstract rules, which exist only for us, not for themselves. Moral laws and rules as such mean nothing to themselves. Moral laws and rules as such do not care whether we obey them or not. Thus, intrinsic identification ethics is better than, contains more goodness than, formal systemic ethics.

Also, unique persons have more worth than merely mindless things, or actions that benefit others and themselves. And abstract internal values such as experienced beauty, adventure, pleasure, happiness, honesty, knowledge, truth, and many particular virtues, etc., are “good for us,” not “good in, to, and for themselves.” They are not selves; they have no selves. They mean nothing to themselves. They do not know or care that they are valuable. We do; we care; they are good for us; they enrich our lives. We do not exist as means to or receptacles that hold their no-self actualization; they exist as elements in our own personal self-actualization. Intrinsic identification ethics is better than, contains more goodness than, extrinsic consequentialist ethics.

Hartman thought we should not confuse internal “good for us” values with “good in, to, and for itself” intrinsic values, as many philosophers do (Edwards 2010, 24-26). Goodness is concept (or standard) fulfillment, as Hartman said (Edwards, 2010, Ch. 1). This means that anything is good if it is as it is supposed or expected to be, as expressed in and measured by conceptual standards or norms. We expect internal “good for us” values like experienced beauty, adventure, love, many virtues (like justice, courage, honesty, humility, etc.), pleasure, happiness, rationality, knowledge, truth, desire-satisfaction, etc., to directly or immediately fill, fulfill, and enhance our lives as human beings. As “good-making properties,” they directly fulfill our norms, expectations, and hopes for ourselves as human beings. They are among the most basic, universal, immediately satisfying, and enduring properties of human well-being. They best actualize or most fulfill universal human nature in enduring, meaningful, satisfying, and self-realizing ways. Still, as individual persons, we are valuable in, to, and for ourselves. Such abstract universals are not valuable to themselves; they are valuable only to us. They (and other internal good-for-us or good-making properties) directly and immediately actualize our “I,” “self,” or “self-realization” concepts. But so do many other universals (repeatable qualities and relations). Many philosophers and others have made this mistake, but we should not confuse universals that are directly and immediately self-fulfilling and beneficial (like pleasures, virtues, etc.) with things that are good to, in, and for themselves (like unique conscious individuals).

Concrete particulars that actualize universals are very important in self-realization, that is, in “I” concept fulfillment. All the above abstract repeatable internal “good for us” properties fulfill us as “human beings” in the abstract. But, as Hartman so heavily emphasized, all of us are far, far more than *generic* human beings or instances of universal human nature. We are all *unique* human beings, far richer in properties than very limited defining attributes of “human,” such as “rational animal” or “featherless biped.”

(The *“I,” “me,”* and *“my”* used here apply to everyone.) All universal or repeatable internal “good for us” properties must be particularized for the fulfillment of every unique “*I*”. For example, all of *my* moral and spiritual virtues are actualized only in *my* station in life and its duties. *My* love for others is always for *my* spouse, *my* children, *my* parents, *my* friends, *my* neighbors, *this* stranger, *this* animal, *this* place, *this* day, *this*…, *this*…, *this*…. I delight in and am thankful for the very existence of *each one*, and in and for the well-being and self-fulfillment of *each one*. *I* act to help *each one* as best *I* can. *I* identify *myself* with *each one* as completely as I can. *All of the particulars* are inseparable from the fulfillment of *my unique self*. The *thisness* (Duns Scotus) of everyone and everything matters for self-realization. So it is with each of the above abstract universal “good for self” properties. *My* self-realization requires them not merely in the abstract but also in the definiteness and uniqueness of *my* own life. To *“be myself”* or *“be true to myself,”* *I* must do *my* duties, work at *my* job, create and delight in *my* beauties, experience *my* pleasures in *these* enjoyable objects, acquire *my* knowledge, love *my* loved ones, fulfill *my* interests, and so on.

Worth noting, perhaps, is that although all of these internal “good for us” properties are self-fulfilling, both their *absence or privation,* and their *opposites,* are self-defeating. Their opposites like ugliness, pains, unhappiness, irrationality, ignorance, falsehoods, amorality, immorality, indifference, vices, and desire or interest frustration are bad for us in the abstract and concretely. They make it difficult or impossible for us to be *“true to ourselves”* morally, spiritually, and otherwise.

**Virtue Ethics and Identification**

*Virtue ethics* has been developed and emphasized by many recent moral thinkers. Virtue ethics is based historically on Aristotle’s suggestion that the morally right thing do is what a virtuous person would do. No set of moral rules is sufficient to cover all of the ethical decisions we have to make. The details of virtue ethics can be spelled out in many different ways. Identification ethics says that *the most virtuous persons conceivable are those who are well informed about relevant circumstances and who identify most fully with others*. Correspondingly, *the right thing to do is what well informed persons exemplifying the virtue of identification with others would do.* All other moral virtues spring somehow from this most basic virtue. Identification with others involves *knowing* and *affirming* the full richness and determinateness of *their* properties, qualities, and relations. It manifests itself in even more specific and concrete virtues. Identification is the most basic and common aspect of all moral virtues, including love, compassion, empathy, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, justice, etc. All moral virtues involve powerful feelings for, knowledge of, concern for, sensitivity to, and identification with others in their own concrete inwardness and external circumstances. The above virtue ethics rule thus means more definitely that *the right or most ethical act as always the one that well informed, fair-minded, loving, empathetic, compassionate, etc. people would do in just those circumstances* (Edwards 2014, 198).

Identification manifested as intense aesthetic concentration upon what is being or has been created is also the psychological basis for artistic, literary, culinary, and all other kinds of creativity (Hartman 1972).

To probe the nature and experience of moral identification with others more deeply, consider this. Persons may be or become “one” with others in many different ways. In marriage, the partners become “one flesh,” so the Bible says. People who share systemic beliefs are “of one mind.” Those who actively cooperate with one another in any way—at work, play, home, or however—are practically or extrinsically are of “one strength.” Those who unite intrinsically, internally, experientially, identify fully with each other in heart, soul, body, mind, and strength.

Virtue ethics requires us to fully identify ourselves with others. When this happens, the differences between “I” and “Thou” just disappear psychologically, experientially, and evaluationally. We achieve profound psychological, experiential, and evaluational union or bonding with them. Existentially or ontologically, our differences still exist, but they do not matter much anymore, and we pay very little if any attention to them. We delight in the very existence of others, as well as of ourselves. We think as the others think, feel as the others feel, desire, and choose as the others desire and choose, etc. The good things that happen to others are experienced as happening to ourselves; we lovingly rejoice with those who rejoice, and we act accordingly. The bad things that happen to them are also experienced as happening to ourselves; we compassionately weep with those who weep, and we act accordingly. Acting to benefit others is experienced as benefiting ourselves, acting to harm others as harming ourselves. Everything that would be *good for* others in the fullness of their definiteness and uniqueness is perceived and valued as good for us. Doing unto others as if we were they is experienced as doing unto ourselves.

Identifying psychologically, experientially, axiologically, and virtuously with others is always approximate, never complete, but the most morally correct or right thing to do is to identify as fully as we can with others and then to act accordingly—to do unto them as we would prefer to be done unto *if we were they*. (The Golden Rule does not work if we do unto others as if they were we, that is, as if they had *our* values, beliefs, feelings, aspirations, culture, personal history, etc.) Of course, we should never identify positively with and approve of the *evil* intents, desires, thoughts, beliefs, choices, or deeds of anyone.

**So, What’s In It For Me?**

Identification ethics requires identifying as fully with others as with ourselves, but it also requires identifying as fully with ourselves as with others—which some people cannot easily do. The primary focus of identification ethics is on others, but self is not neglected or disvalued. *Every* unique person has intrinsic worth, ourselves included. Doing unto ourselves as we should do unto others involves no inherent selfishness or *exclusive* self-interestedness. We have moral duties to ourselves as well as to others. We do not always automatically or “naturally” do what is best for ourselves, despite our basic self-interestedness.

Where consequentialist ethics focuses primarily on beneficial external actions, identification ethics focuses primarily on beneficial internal qualities, relations, experiences, and activities, but without neglecting desirable external moral actions. *In identification ethics, we are duty bound to optimal internal and external self-development or self-realization, and that is the first very good thing that is in it for us.* We do not always do what is best for ourselves “by nature,” as some philosophers claim, for we often neglect ourselves and fail to understand or do what is best for ourselves, internally and externally. We owe it to ourselves to develop and express our positive systemic, extrinsic, and intrinsic *values and evaluation* capacities as much as possible. These three dimensions of goodness should be properly prioritized in accord with Hartman’s hierarchy of values, which affirms that even if systemic goods are exceptionally good, extrinsic goods are even better, and intrinsic goods are best of all (Edwards 2010, 40-41). We ought to value persons and actualize all internal “good for us” values in both ourselves and others as much as we can *in proportion to their degrees of goodness*. “Ought” just means, “This would be best, so do it!”

According to identification ethics, *the second thing in it for me is that through identification, all goodness everywhere can become my own personal goodness*, though not in a selfish way, because I am no longer an exclusively or narrowly self-interested person. Sigmund Freud paid a great deal of attention to the psychology of identification (Freud 1957, 185-188), and so do many of today’s psychologists (Snyder and Lopez 2001, 436-442; Woodward 2003; Olds 2006). Freud’s own understanding of “identification” was rather narrow. He emphasized taking an “object” into oneself, e.g., one’s father or mother, for the purpose of imitating or being like him, or her, or it. Freud called identification, “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person” and “the original form of emotional tie with an object” (185). He recognized its connection with other important psychological concepts like “empathy,” “group,” “love,” and “infatuation” (186, 188n, 191). In love, we take others into ourselves and are “enriched with the properties of the object;” in infatuation, we “introject” or take others into ourselves but are “impoverished” thereby because we surrender ourselves “to the object” (191).

Freud recognized that when identifying with something or someone, *“the ego has enriched itself with the properties of the object”* (Freud 1957, 191, italics added). This was *a really incredible value insight*, but Freud did not make much of it or fully grasp its evaluational significance. When identifying with someone or something else, we really do take themselves and their desirable or “good making” qualities and relations into ourselves psychologically, experientially, and axiologically. We make them our own, and thereby we immensely enrich our own internal lives and conscious souls. Aristotle noted that in perception we take the sensory forms of other things into ourselves. Identification ethics says that we can and should also take all forms of goodness everywhere into ourselves and make them our own.

When practicing identification ethics, we become one with others in such a way that experientially and internally their goodness becomes our goodness, (and their badness, suffering, problems, and burdens become our own). This refers to much more than just their moral goodness, however. Every kind of goodness is included—their inherent worth and their moral virtues and actions, yes, but also their beauty, talents, gifts, knowledge, beliefs, feelings, desires, interests, abilities, achievements, employments, activities, joys, experiences—everything desirable about them. When we fully identify ourselves with others, all of their good-making properties become our own good-making properties internally, psychologically, experientially, and axiologically. As whole persons they are absorbed into our own innermost selves. Thereby, we are no longer small and purely selfish egos, or exclusively self-interested selves. Their happiness becomes our happiness; their desires and interests become our desires and interests, their fulfillment becomes our fulfillment, their well-being becomes our well-being, their point of view becomes our point of view. Who and what they love, we love. What happens to and within them also happens to and within us. When they are winners we are winners; when they are losers we are losers; it all feels just the same. What is good (or bad) for them is good (or bad) for us. Their enrichment or diminishment in good-making properties becomes our own enrichment or loss. We rejoice as they rejoice and weep as they weep. As we grow experientially, morally, and spiritually, our lives become richer and richer internally in good-making properties—their properties.

Everyone wants to live abundantly. Axiologically, “abundance” just means “rich in good-making properties.” “More abundant” just means “richer….” Identification with others accomplishes our own enrichment. As Freud said, when we identify, *we are enriched by the properties of the object*. Identifying intrinsically with everyone means taking *everyone’s goodness* into ourselves and making everyone’s good-making properties our own for psychological, experiential, evaluational, moral, and spiritual purposes. By so expanding our own souls (growing in grace), we would indeed live more abundantly, but not in a selfish way, for the “self” that identifies with others would be a greatly changed, enlarged, expanded, enriched, and enhanced self. We would no longer be small, narrow, selfish selves. When we don’t love others, all others, even “outsiders,” even our “enemies,” we thereby impoverish ourselves. In practice, we succeed ethically and spiritually only by degrees.

Though not directly intended, identification with others is self-beneficial, but not in terms of worldly prosperity. “Virtue is its own reward,” it has often been said. Just how this is so is usually not explained very well. Identification ethics explains it adequately. Morally good people live better, more abundantly, *internally* than morally deficient people do because their lives are internally richer in good-making properties, properly ordered. As quoted already, Hartman said of good people that their identification experiences are located *“within themselves.”* “Better” just means “richer in good-making properties;” but this does not mean (or exclude) “being rich” *externally*.

Carefully consider this word of caution as we move next into identification spirituality. *Inward* intrinsic ethical and spiritual abundance has little or nothing to do directly with *outward* extrinsic materialistic riches, power, social status, and success, as promised by the so-called “prosperity gospel” evangelists. According to this now popular religion of worldly prosperity, God guarantees that you will be *extrinsically* healthy, wealthy, powerful, dominant, sexy, and successful, and that no harms, dangers, diseases, or horrible accidents will ever befall you—if you will only think positively, believe the right stuff, and give money to or otherwise support the right prosperity-preaching religious authorities.

The virtue of intellectual honesty requires us to face reality. Facing reality, as we must do eventually, we know perfectly well that bad things often happen to good people, good things, too. Jesus well understood that the sun shines and the rain falls upon the just and the unjust. So did Job and Jeremiah. Facing reality is a very good thing, even in religion, especially in religion.

**The Scope of Identification Spirituality**

Just how far can and should inner identification with others be extended? In practice, only finitely, for we are finite beings, but in theory, infinitely. Thus far, the scope of identification ethics has been restricted to unique human beings. However, recall that this article began with very familiar non-moral experiences of identifying with all sorts of things like football teams, games, jobs, works of art, property, and killing in combat. As for people, even today we typically self-identify mainly with members of our own kind, kin, family, friends, race, nation, or religion, etc. We identify with *our kind* of people, not with *those kind* of people. Originally, as Charles Darwin noted, ethics applied only to members of one’s own tribe or clan, not to outsiders. Historically, at the dawn of moral consciousness, only one’s own tribal members had moral standing and were valued, respected, and treated in ethically appropriate ways. Outsiders had no moral significance and were not worthy of moral consideration, treatment, or protection. Most of us today are still not very far removed from such moral provincialism. Today, for example, far too many white Christians refuse to relate *morally* to Blacks, Latinos, Asians, Jews, Muslims, Democrats, Republicans, etc. This may be only wishful thinking, but philosophers say that ethics applies universally. This means that all human beings have moral significance, standing, and rights, not just our own kin or kind, and that we have moral duties to everyone, not just to insiders. Identification ethics is indeed for everyone, but our lingering moral provincialism says and does otherwise.

In recent decades, ethical theory and practice have broadened significantly to include animal and environmental ethics. Identification ethics can go there as well. How would *we*, our behaviors, our sympathies, and our diets be changed, our own lives enriched in goodness, and *their* lives protected from harm, suffering, and death, if we identified more strongly with animals, all animals? We already do this with our own pets, but why stop there? And why stop with animals? How would we, our environment, and the world be changed, enriched in goodness, and protected from harm, if we were to identify fully with all living things, and even further with the beneficial non-living environment that supports us all? John B. Cobb, Jr., who I regard as the world’s greatest living Christian theologian, recently said, “I’m interested in the way people think and feel, in such a way that the natural world and what happens to it is recognized as also happening to them.” (Quoted in Hitchens, Visick, and Overy-Brown, 2016, 3). But why should our identification be limited to our earth and its inhabitants? What if we discovered for sure, as we will someday, that our universe contains innumerable inhabited planets? Could we then identify imaginatively to some degree with God’s “aliens”? Doesn’t God love them too?

Could we identify with the whole universe? Union with the cosmos is not far removed from union with God or the Divine. Could we identify with a comprehensive reality that includes God, or something ultimate, worshipful, trustworthy, loving, knowing, caring, transcendent, and immanent that has immense spiritual significance? At that point, if not before, we would reach the fullness of both identification ethics and identification spirituality. At some indefinite developmental point along the way, the two seem to merge in scope. Ideally, spirituality identifies with all in all, that is, with God and with everyone and everything loved by God, without borders or boundaries. In practice, we only approximate this ideal of moral and spiritual perfection.

**Identification and Mysticism**

When we dig even deeper into identification experiences, we will discover that *all* of them, not just experiences of the Ultimate or Divine, significantly resemble mystical experiences. As Marlantes suggested, even warriors in combat experience negative, mystical, demonic, identification ecstasy, but our present concern is not with evil. It is with positive identification with goodness. To see positive identification’s similarities with mysticism, we should try to recall some of the most wonderful, special, joyous, fulfilling, and exuberant experiences we have ever had, experiences so overwhelming, ecstatic, and awesome that we never wanted them to end. Then we should ask ourselves if we were intensely *self* conscious during those experiences. We will likely discover that, when fully manifest, all identification experiences, non-moral, moral, and spiritual, are *self-less* in several spiritually interesting, mystical, important, and desirable ways.

First, during all magical identification moments, we are *not thinking about ourselves*; words like “I,” “me,” “my,” and “mine” are not present in our minds or consciousness.

Second, we are *not consciously aware of ourselves* as distinct from the realities we most value, with which we most fully identify, and on which we most intensely concentrate. We are psychologically, experientially, and evaluationally enthralled by and absorbed into these realities, and they into us. We experience, “That art thou,” “I am thou.”

Third, we are *not* trying to *manipulate, use, or exploit* these realities. We are happy to let them be and to become a part of ourselves on their own terms. We willingly open ourselves to these other realities and allow them to reveal themselves to us just as they are.

Fourth, we are *not trying* very hard, if at all, *to* *classify* the realities with which we identify, or to make them fit into our pre-existing doctrinal, religious, philosophical, or commonsense belief systems. Mystics often characterize mystical experiences as thought-less. During all magical identification moments, cognitive thinking may be greatly reduced or “bracketed,” if not altogether absent. The interpreter function of our left-brain is relatively at rest. Realities are experienced and valued directly and immediately, with little or no categorizing, cataloging, classifying, or pigeonholing of them. Serious conceptualizing about them may come later, however.

In identity-with-others experiences, we *lose ourselves* only to find ourselves on a deeper level. Our narrow, constricted, selfish ego is lost, restructured, transcended, and a “born again,” transformed, new self is discovered or created. This *new-self* is causally, temporally, and spatially continuous with, but not quite the same as, our old lost or transcended self or ego, but it is “still me.” It is not a *no-self* but a new-self. With the passage of time and reflection, we recognize our old lesser selves as aspects of our own transformed ongoing past, present, and future personal and spiritual identities.

Like mystical experiences, identification experiences are fleeting, transient, impermanent; but they permanently change us, how we act, what we do, what and how we value, what and how we think and feel, how we live and love.

Identification consciousness is a third level of awareness that transcends mere consciousness and ordinary everyday self-consciousness. (It is often said, much too hastily, that non-human animals are merely conscious, whereas we are self-conscious.) As we develop and use our positive identification gifts, we become internally more enriched, developed, and advanced ethically and spiritually. We change or grow into higher, less egocentric, more unselfish selves. All things become new, but we are still unique, finite, temporally ordered centers or fields of experience, thought, feeling, affection, evaluation, choice, and activity. We are still causally connected to our own pasts and futures. Socially or relationally, we are always members of one another. As sanctification (saint-making) proceeds, we become richer-in-goodness selves who live more meaningfully and abundantly through profound spiritual union with others. We become better and more sanctified spiritual seekers and finders. We lose our ordinary conscious or self-aware selves, but truer, deeper, more fulfilled, more abundant selves are found—selves who abide in all goodness, and all goodness abides in us. *Spirituality* is an experienced positive union of all in all, a sensitivity to the holiness or sacredness of all in all, an awareness of the presence of God in all, and of everyone and everything in God.

**Applying Hartmanian Value Theory to Identification Spirituality**

What relevance does Hartmanian value theory have to identification spirituality? Is this the very best available form of spirituality? Hartman thought that positive intrinsic evaluation (identification) is the highest, best, richest, or most abundant-in-goodness form of *evaluation*, and intrinsic value objects (unique conscious individuals and their self-fulfillment or well-being) have the highest *value*. Where does intrinsic evaluation of intrinsic values take us spiritually? Here is Hartman’s answer, quoted once already:

In the intrinsic dimension all intrinsic selves are one. Identification with the other is the very core of this reality....People in contact with this realm are self-actualizing, in Maslow’s sense, and have the capacity, as Viktor Frankl and others have shown, to survive the most horrible experiences. They summon their inner resources. Within themselves, they are one with their beloved ones, and through identification with others and with the world, they become united with themselves. (Hartman 2006, 137)

Along similar lines, Hartman also wrote,

In other words, in the inner core of our Self we are intrinsically one with every other Self. The cones of our Selfhood all meet at the vertex. There is one community, one core, of all mankind. This reality Jesus called the Kingdom of God that is within us, Kant called it the Kingdom of Ends, Royce and others called it by other names. In it, intrinsically, we are all one; and when we do a bad thing everybody has done it with us and through us. (Hartman, ND, “The Value Structure of Personality,” 24).

Here, Hartman was discussing identification or intrinsic *evaluation* experiences. He was not denying our existential or ontological distinctness, uniqueness, and intrinsic *value*. We are “intrinsically one,” not “ontologically one,” he claimed.

Intense feelings are key elements in the intrinsic evaluation of, or self-identification-with, others, but they are not the only elements required for recognizing and evaluating intrinsic values. Both feelings and cognitions are required for making *judgments* about intrinsic goodness. Conceptual knowledge, standards, and their fulfillment also matter, for “good” just means concept (or standard) fulfillment,” as Hartman said (Edwards, 2010, Ch. 1). *Valuable things* fulfill the ideal conceptual standards we apply to them. Identification is the core affective or non-cognitive element common to all instances of intrinsic *evaluation*—love, empathy, compassion, conscience, joyfulness, intense concentration, creativity, religious devotion, and mystical ecstasy. People highly developed internally in these evaluational capacities live more abundantly than those in whom they are weakly developed or absent. They live richer lives, better lives, more moral lives, more saintly lives. Theism at its best says that abundant life consists in inner spiritual union or identification with a loving God and with all of God’s beloved creatures. It does not consist in loving extrinsic treasures on earth. Saintliness and meaningful abundant living are directly connected. Saints have more meaningful, worthwhile, and abundant-in-all-goodness inner lives than spiritual beginners and sinners. Saintliness and abundant living are directly connected.

How should spiritual seekers conceive of abundant living? With Hartman’s value theory, we can now define an “abundant spiritual life,” one that is really worth living, as “a life that is rich in good-making qualities and relations, and the richer the better.” The most meaningful and abundant life conceivable is infinitely rich in good-making qualities and relations, specifically, God’s life. To give an axiological paraphrase of St. Anselm, God is “that being than whom none richer in good-making properties can be conceived.” A meaningful and abundant *human* life should be as profusely God-like (as rich in goodness) as humanly and individually possible. Some mystics conceive of the Ultimate as pure emptiness, as pure consciousness that is not conscious of anything. This monistic mystical consciousness lacks all properties, desirable or not, and monistic mystics aspire to be like that. Identification spiritualists, by contrast, conceive of God as pure fullness, as containing all actual individuals and all their good-making qualities and relations in all value dimensions, and they yearn for and strive to be like that. Axiological mystical fullness includes all goodness; monistic mystical emptiness excludes it, all of it, (unless it cheats and slips some content into its “emptiness”).

Robert S. Hartman clearly emphasized mystical experiences of fullness, not of emptiness (Hartman 1967, 224). Ideally, profound spirituality attains complete identification and union with the Ultimate, however understood. For monotheists, this is spiritual union with the fullness of God. The final objective is complete faith or trust in and identification with God as “all in all,” a phrase occurring several times in the New Testament (1 Cor. 12:6, 15:28; Eph. 1:23). A meaningful and worthwhile life is abundantly rich in intrinsically valuable individuals and all of their good-making properties, qualities, and relations, including everyone’s unique relational and experiential union with and within God.

We can acquire or internalize abundance-making individuals and their properties in at least three ways. The systemic way is just thinking, conceiving, contemplating, or daydreaming disinterestedly or objectively about good things. The extrinsic way is perceiving, experiencing, and responding to good things with normal everyday feelings, sensations, and desires, then using them to pursue practical goals, and/or doing something that creates and sustains them. Actions, “good works,” are the extrinsic way; spiritually, actions become “the works of love.” The intrinsic way is fully identifying ethically and spiritually with, and thus loving, all good things, no matter who, where, when, or what they are, or in whom they are located, or who owns them, or whether anyone owns them or not. In positive intrinsic identification (e.g., love), extrinsic and systemic distinctions do not matter, but they do not disappear. They are included in intrinsic love, as are all good things. Truly abundant living involves internalizing as much goodness as possible in each of these three ways, in every dimension of goodness. Optimally, *everything is valued intrinsically, but not idolatrously*. How can this be done?

When identifying with someone, something, or somethought, we really do take them and their desirable (or undesirable) qualities and relations into ourselves, and this immensely enriches our own lives and conscious souls. The most effective way to live most abundantly is to identify intensely with and thus include within ourselves all the good things we can in all three dimensions of value, that is, with systemic goods, extrinsic goods, and intrinsic goods *properly prioritized*, and the more the better. Actually doing this correctly without overvaluing anything is partly a gift of nature or grace, but we can also learn, nurture, model, and teach this. We can help ourselves and others establish proper priorities for our identification and evaluational capacities.

So what are our proper priorities as spiritual seekers? Should we intrinsically value only intrinsic value-objects, only conscious souls, only unique persons? Priorities matter to all saintly souls. Can non-intrinsic values (e.g., ideas, truths, or the “things of the world”) be loved (valued intrinsically) without lapsing into idolatry, without overvaluing them? Consider this answer, based on Hartman’s hierarchy of value. Identifying with (loving) systemic values, e.g., divine *laws*, *beliefs* about God, Christ, Moses, Mohammed, and so on, is very good (“enriches the ego,” as Freud might say), as long as we also identify more fully with and give even higher priority to more valuable extrinsic goods like putting our faith into practice, working for and sharing the physical necessities and comforts of life, enjoying the beauty of the earth, and doing the *works* of love, mercy, kindness, and justice. Identifying with these useful extrinsic goods, works, and activities is also excellent, so long as we most fully identify with and give highest priority to even more precious conscious *intrinsic goods* like God, people, animals, and all conscious or sentient beings as ends in themselves.

When loving good things, we should get our priorities straight and observe Hartman’s hierarchy of value-objects. *Good things ought to be loved, identified with, or valued intrinsically (and otherwise) in proportion to their actual degree of worth.* Overvaluing anything can be idolatry, but intrinsically valuing all in all is not idolatrous as long as everything is properly prioritized. In his own way and words, Jesus taught that loving intrinsically good realities has the highest spiritual priority. God comes first, neighbors and self come second (Mk. 12:30-33), but other good things like the necessities and comforts of life may then be “added unto” these (Mat. 6:25 and 31-32). Faith, hope, and love, St. Paul thought, are wondrous spiritual gifts, but *the greatest* of these is love (I. Cor. 13).

*Loving in proportion to degree of goodness* is better than loving systemic value objects—doctrines, rules, knowledge, truths, conceptual systems and symbols—most or first of all, that is, more than people, or animals, or God. Modern universities claim to pursue “truth for its own sake” (not for our sake). Universities, dogmatists, authoritarians, intellectuals, and rigid fanatics tend to overvalue systemic goods. Other criteria are relevant for other purposes, but *the ultimate spiritual test* for the validity of religious beliefs and guidelines is *whether accepting and living by them would help us to become more intrinsically loving, empathetic, compassionate, helpful, kind, forgiving, and virtuous.* Laws and beliefs were made for people, not people for laws and beliefs.

Worldly people, by contrast, overvalue the soul-less but useful and extrinsically desirable sensory things, processes, and activities, but loving God and our human and animal neighbors as self is better than (richer in value than) most loving physical things, processes, property, prosperity, activities, and social status. “Worldly goods” have a valid place in identification spirituality, but not the ultimate place, and definitely not the high place of the so-called “prosperity gospel.” Identification saints can and do love and take great delight in the physical necessities of life, the sensory beauty and comforts of the earth, and the awesome starry heavens above that “declare the glory of God.” They give up everything for God, but then they get it all back again enriched through spiritual identification and sanctification. Abraham’s getting Isaac back after completely giving him up was Kierkegaard’s prime example of this. (This would be Ishmael in Islam.)

Seeing and experiencing everything as sacred is very different from glorying primarily in worldly prosperity, ownership, control, or possession. Identification spiritualists bring extrinsic and systemic goods up into the intrinsic, where they are even better than before, where they are intrinsically valued under and within God, (*sub species aeternitatis*), not simply prized extrinsically for their practicality or usefulness, systemically as knowledge or truth, or intrinsically treasured and overvalued in idolatrous ways. Once God is found, except for evils, all things, times, processes, places, profits, possessions, vocations, recreations, pleasures, activities, practices, beliefs, thoughts, formalities, and unique experiencing realities can be loved, sanctified, included, and experienced as holy manifestations of God’s creativity, love, and all-pervasive presence. Spiritually, every good thing can be valued intrinsically, and in every other value dimension, properly ranked.

Identification spirituality illuminates the real significance of physical devotional objects like religious ornaments, shrines, houses of worship, and holy places, practices, rituals, ceremonies, sacraments, hymns, and music. In practice, all of them combine systemically valuable patterns, forms, and beliefs with extrinsically valuable physical realities, objects, processes, and activities. But religious value combinations do not stop there. When spiritually effective, systemic-extrinsic value combinations contribute significantly to intrinsic spiritual, moral, and personal growth and enhancement. They facilitate intense intrinsic social and devotional union, solidarity, and bonding.

But which historically available religious practices, sacraments, ornaments, and devotional activities are spiritually helpful or justified? “Helping us to develop our identification capacities and thus to become more intrinsically loving, empathetic, compassionate, forgiving, etc.” is the most definitive spiritual criterion of enlightened spiritual truth *and* practice. All devotional objects, sacraments, rituals, formalities, beliefs, practices, and activities that help us to find and express intense intrinsic devotional union and solidarity with others, including God, are welcome. Those that do not do this are not welcome. Working spiritually just means becoming more devoted, inclusive, sensitive, loving, empathetic, merciful, just, forgiving, and virtuous.

Of course, what works for some will not work for others. Cultural and historical factors and influences make a great difference in spiritual effectiveness, but God can be there in all, and God can be OK with all sincere efforts to live lovingly. “God is love and *all who love are of God”* (I. John, 3:10-11). Seekers everywhere should use whatever *means* of grace that work (lovingly) for them without disvaluing and disparaging what works for others. Loving others means loving what works for them. Nothing human works perfectly.

Not getting our moral and spiritual priorities straight messes up our lives. In degree of value, God and unique conscious souls rank first and second, doing the works of love, mercy, and justice come next, and systemic realities or truths, beliefs, laws, and formalities rank last. Without neglecting any kind of goodness, identification spiritualists emphasize loving, and so living, more than merely owning, doing, or using, and more than merely believing, thinking, knowing, or contemplating, although love inevitably clothes and expresses itself in both action and cognition.

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