

The Essential Moral Self

Presentation by Nina Strohminger

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Ever since Locke, it has been postulated that personal identity is judged on the basis of mental features. However,

the possibility that certain parts of the mind are especially central to identity has not been systematically investigated. In this talk, I lay out the evidence that our sense of identity—both in ourselves and in others—arises primarily from the continuity of moral traits. This pattern emerges repeatedly across a variety of domains, from brain damage and drug use to folk beliefs about reincarnation and the soul. Data from children and Eastern populations indicates that this privileging of moral character emerges early and is cross-culturally robust. Furthermore, identity change mediates real-world outcomes such as the robustness of personal relationships. Potential explanations for this phenomenon, along with implications for the field, are discussed.



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