What is personality?

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In recent meetings, we've considered the topic of why reason doesn't always work to resolve disagreements. I've approached the topic in terms of goal analysis: analyzing how two people differ in their goals. By contrast, Ray has focused on personal identity as the major factor determining our behavior: we think, speak, and act as we do because of who we are.

This raises the question of how to characterize a person. More abstractly, what is personality? I propose that we can explain personality in terms of goal analysis and thereby obtain convergence between my theory of goal analysis and Ray's theory of personal identity.

Goal analysis

The obvious way to characterize a person is in terms of their propensities in thinking, speaking, and acting. But since a human is an intelligent, goal-directed creature, let's characterize a person in terms of their goals — their goal tree — and explain their thinking, speaking, and acting in terms of their goal tree. Keep in mind that values are an expression of goals.

This seems obvious for goals that a person adopts through explicit reasoning, and it also seems true for goals that a person assimilates from their culture and their social groups.

But what about the features of personality that are characterized in terms of personality temperament? For example, consider extroversion. A person tends to be extrovert because of inborn propensities, along with experiences in life, which together shape the person's propensities in thinking, speaking, and acting. A person does not necessarily decide to become extrovert and train themself accordingly, although such intentionality and training are possible.

In the absence of such intentionality and training, why should we represent personality temperament in terms of goal analysis?

Since a human is an intelligent, goal-directed creature, we can say that they have their particular personality temperament because they are seeking to achieve corresponding goals — goals that are evidently best achieved by such a temperament. In these terms, a person tends to be extrovert because of inborn propensities, along with experiences in life, that together shape the person's goals, and these goals, in turn, engender an extrovert temperament.

But what about a person who wants to be an extrovert, say, but seems, by nature, to be introvert? If they want to be an extrovert, then they have the overall goal of extroversion, so why can't they readily think, speak, and act accordingly? Any kind of behavior comes more naturally and more easily to some people than to others. This is most notable for trained skills, such as athletic skills and musical skills, but it will apply to personality skills, as well. Hence, a person can train to become more extrovert, and such training will naturally occur in training for a job that requires extroversion for best performance — a job such as sales.

Meeting format

I will seed the discussion with the foregoing theory of goal analysis, and then we will discuss the topic, considering any point of view of interest to the members.

To make the discussion more concrete, I invite you to think about your own personality temperament. Consider how its features correspond to goals — and hence values — that seem inherent in your personality. Also, consider how your temperament has changed over the years and how such change corresponds to goals and values that have changed over the years.