Being Your Self:
Identity, Metaphysics, and the
Search for Authenticity

by

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ABSTRACT

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It has been widely held in our culture for centuries that one ought to “be oneself,” an imperative often referred to as authenticity. The meaning of authenticity, however, remains contested among philosophers and largely shapeless in most people’s minds. In order to make sense of this compelling idea, one must reconcile authenticity with the metaphysics of selfhood and identity.

In all of its applications, ‘authenticity’ refers to a convergence between how something presents itself and what it actually is. Yet the marriage of authenticity, with its essentialist structure, and personal identity, with its built-in temporal openness, is prima facie dubious. Authenticity appeals to something true and unchanging, but a person’s identity evolves throughout her life. Furthermore, the ideal of “being oneself” requires that it also be possible to be “not oneself,” but it is difficult to explain how any individual could be other than who she is. I argue that previous theories of authenticity have not adequately negotiated these structural requirements.

Heidegger provides an account of authenticity as a formal existential possibility for Dasein. Because of its restriction to ontological phenomena, his analysis fails to show what authenticity actually means for Dasein and how its authentic existence is connected to its identity. Sartre likewise describes authenticity as an ideal ontological state, but his belief in radical freedom translates into a denial of the metaphysics of identity that could explain the content of authenticity. Despite being the locus of the most influential twentieth century
accounts, existentialism cannot capture authenticity because of its inability to investigate who one is and how certain choices are more or less essential to our selves.

I pursue such an investigation by distinguishing between authenticity and related notions such as originality, sincerity, wholeheartedness, and narrative unity. I argue that authenticity must account for change in personal identity as well as the social and interpretive dimensions of selfhood without forfeiting the criterion that there is something true about who we are. In my view of authenticity as reflective consistency I argue that we can be ourselves by acting in accordance with our necessary dispositions in a certain situation.
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INTRODUCTION

It has been widely held in our culture for several centuries that each person is an individual endowed with unique characteristics and possibilities. To be human is not to follow a formula of human-ness, nor to plod through life as an undifferentiated member of the species; rather, to lead a human life – at least a fulfilling one – is usually thought to require honouring what it means to be human for me as a once-occurring person. The Western conception of selfhood to which we have become accustomed thus corresponds to an ethical ideal of how to live one’s life. Despite the centuries-long debate over how we ought to live, one conclusion has remained almost constant: one ought, if nothing else, to be oneself. One ought, in other words, to be authentic.

The value of authenticity is so easily accepted as to be invisible: whether the context is personal identity, cuisine, ethnic artifacts, or works of art, authenticity is one of those rare qualities that are considered good without qualification. Conversely, inauthentic things or people are almost universally discredited as “fake,” “unoriginal” or “shams.” While these aesthetic and moral judgments occur frequently in both academic and non-academic discourse, however, we have no robust definition of authenticity to justify these assessments. What it means for a person to actually “be authentic” is left suspiciously vague, even as we insist again and again on the importance of authentic living.

My project is to subject the possibility of personal authenticity to a careful philosophical analysis and conclude with a constructive account of its actual meaning. I am interested in both the metaphysical structure of authenticity and its putative value. The structure is problematic because it requires objective measures of reality that are incongruous with our normal beliefs
about selfhood. Without a firm explanation of how authenticity applies to personal identity and how it is to be distinguished from inauthenticity, both the meaning and value of this notion are philosophically suspect.

I will be using the phrase “personal identity” throughout this thesis in a somewhat unconventional sense, referring not to questions of personhood but to the qualitative identity of individual persons. Authenticity appeals to the self’s individual characteristics, affiliations, and commitments, which are best designated by the umbrella term “identity.” This usage is distinct from its application in most philosophical literature on personal identity, which concerns itself with numerically identifying distinct persons and establishing the parameters and conditions of personhood. Questions of authenticity arise independently of such investigations. Any individual, regardless of where his personhood starts or ends, stands in a certain relationship to himself and has a certain identity. As will become clear, authenticity is a qualitative measure of that relationship. We may therefore speak of authenticity in personal identity without invoking meta-questions about what it means to be a person.

I. Becoming Oneself from Socrates to Sartre

One could approach the philosophy of authenticity from a historical perspective that begins with the earliest records of Western philosophy and traces the evolution of selfhood through to the present era. ¹ The material worth considering is expansive, each installment contributing something useful to a contemporary analysis of authenticity. Without dwelling at too much length on this history, it is germane to chart some of the key moments in the

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¹ Without focusing on authenticity as such, this is essentially Charles Taylor’s task in his monumental contribution to the philosophy of selfhood, Sources of the Self as well as Jerrold Seigel’s The Idea of the Self. In terms of the history of authenticity specifically, the most accessible and succinct summary is Charles Guignon’s On Being Authentic. A less systematic but equally rich consideration of authenticity’s history is Lionel Trilling’s Sincerity and Authenticity.
development of authenticity as a Western ideal and in particular its instantiation in the Romantic movement, which is the model to which many critiques return.

The relation of the self to itself has been an important topic in philosophy, and specifically ethics, since the origins of the Western tradition. Foucault’s analysis of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy reveals a profound concern with “care of the self” (epimeleia heautou or cura sui) from Socrates to Plutarch (Care of the Self 43). Through intricate practices of self-discipline, cultivation, and reflection, the educated men of the ancient world self-consciously fashioned themselves according to the virtues of the time: “a whole art of self-knowledge developed, with precise recipes, specific forms of examination, and codified exercises” (Foucault, Care of the Self 58). The goal of this care for the self was not only to improve oneself in general terms but also to attend to one’s individual qualities, establishing a rich relationship to oneself. Seneca “commands a whole vocabulary for designating the different forms that ought to be taken by the care of the self and the haste with which one seeks to reunite with oneself” (Foucault, Care of the Self 46). His advice is saturated with allusions to authenticity: “Se formare, sibi vindicare, se facere, se ad studia revocare, sibi applicare, suum fieri, in se recedere, ad se recurrere, secum morari”2 (Foucault, Care of the Self 46). Epictetus likewise speaks of a “conversion to oneself” (epistrophē eis heauton) (Discourses, Enchiridion; quoted in Care of the Self 64). Yet the emphasis in these formulations of how to relate to oneself remain broadly ethical and prescriptive: the purpose of knowing or returning to oneself is to better discipline oneself and control the type of person one becomes. It is not to discover who one already is. The ancient view of the self did not consider it valuable to simply be who one is for its own sake; “care of the self” means rather to make oneself into who one wants to

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2 form oneself, appropriate oneself, make oneself, apply oneself to study, devote oneself to oneself, become oneself, withdraw into oneself, return to oneself, care for oneself (my translation)
be, as informed by certain aesthetic and moral ideals. Although the content of the ideal self developed over this period, with varying degrees of emphasis on self-denial or pleasure, the locus of ethics remained establishing the proper relationship to oneself as a means of living more virtuously. This is not quite the same as a concern for authenticity, but it may have laid the groundwork for Western philosophy’s preoccupation with self-analysis and self-identity. Significantly, however, the care of the self was limited to those with the education, means, and social status to indulge in such practices.

In the Christian era the nature of the concern for the self shifted from the ancient “aesthetics of existence” to a much narrower view of ethics. Self-discipline and surveillance were practiced, not as freely undertaken and self-designed exercises in personal growth, but as microcosms of a social order with rigid norms. The hierarchical society of mediaeval Europe defined each person’s role in terms of class, gender, profession, and other social positions, rather than in terms of individual characteristics or aspirations, and the overarching doctrine of the Church determined how it was appropriate for individuals to relate to themselves. In order for authenticity to arise as a concern for Western culture, the pendulum had to swing back from a collectivist notion of identity to a climate in which identity was definable in terms of an atomistic self. This sea change occurred sometime in the early Renaissance, when a combination of religious, social, and intellectual developments made room for the idea of a subject with unique and self-determining importance (Guignon, On Being Authentic 27-35; Taylor, Sources 355-376). Luther’s revolution popularized the idea that each person could have an unmediated individual relationship to God. Kant formalized the connection between ethics and autonomy by arguing that each person is an end in himself and an independent legislator of

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3 Foucault argues this throughout his works, especially Discipline and Punish, Madness and Civilization, and The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction.
the moral law. Fichte, building on Kant’s transcendental idealism, described the subject as freely self-positing and metaphysically prior to all social and historical institutions. Now texture was added to the idea of a person who was formerly defined strictly by his status in a cosmic order or social hierarchy; now it was possible to ask how a free person might chart her own life according to autonomously chosen principles. It became accepted that there are special ways of being oneself, ones that are not determined by social contingencies. Though still under significant construction, the concept of authenticity as we now know it had made its debut.

Several salient features of the Romantic conception of selfhood and authenticity deserve to be mentioned, as they continue to influence our understanding of authenticity today.4 First, the development of authenticity in the literature and philosophy of the period was predicated on a relatively recent assumption in Western culture of the uniqueness of persons and the attendant belief that the good life will vary between persons. Whether one’s uniqueness was attributed to God or non-deistic forces such as “Nature,” this assumption made it possible to talk about authenticity as a measure of one’s relation to one’s own peculiar traits and possibilities, rather than the fulfillment of merely external obligations and ideals. Montesquieu was among the first to make this argument, which is summarized by Marshall Berman as follows: “Nature, which expresses itself through an infinite diversity of forms, endows every man with a personality uniquely his own, which he should express and cultivate” (22). Johann Gottfried Herder argued that “each person is to be measured by a different yardstick, one which is properly his or her own” (Taylor, Sources 375). The descriptive fact, embraced in the late eighteenth century, that

4 In drawing out these general features I am not purporting to represent the Romantic movement on the whole. Nor do each of the authors mentioned necessarily share the views of all the other authors. Taylor is reluctant to generalize about Romanticism at all, choosing instead to focus on narrower trends of the period, such as naturalism and expressivism. See Taylor, Sources 355-392.
each individual might have a distinct purpose in life paved the way for the normative ideal of authenticity according to which one ought to fulfill one’s own unique promise.

A second feature of the Romantics’ breakthrough was the division it implied between inner and outer, self and other. Now that individuals were seen as unique seats of human experience with independent possibilities and aspirations, it made sense to distinguish between the self one experienced and the self as it was experienced by others. Having accepted this simple split, however, new questions developed concerning the capacity for self-knowledge, sincerity, and knowledge of others. Pascal was skeptical about our ability to access the true self within: “Où est donc ce moi? [Where is this supposed ‘I’?]” he asked (Taylor, Sources 357). Rousseau was concerned with the problem of sincerity, or the match-up between one’s inner self and its external presentation: according to him, “[the self’s] inner life is hidden from the outward of men” (Berman 80). Questions of sincerity are hard to disentangle from those of authenticity, the Romantics discovered, because both depend upon the knowability of one’s own self, which could no longer be established by turning to generic formulas or social conventions. The identity of the self in a social context can be just as confounding for oneself as it is for others.

The implied opposition between nature and culture, usually grafted onto the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity, is a third important aspect of the Romantics’ conception of selfhood. Nature was typically exalted as the source of personal truth, authentic identity, and the much sought-after “purity” that contrasted with the corrupting influence of civilization. In Émile Rousseau claimed, “il n’y a point de perversité originelle dans le coeur humain [there is no original sin in the human heart],” implying that corruption only comes from the “outside,” and this view was echoed in the works of a host of poets and thinkers, including Hölderlin,
Schelling, Novalis, and Goethe (Emile quoted in Taylor, Sources 357). Authenticity, for the Romantics, demands a return to nature: “The original impulse of nature is right, but the effect of a depraved culture is that we lost contact with it” (Taylor, Sources 357). The source of all “sin,” or inauthenticity, was thought to be modern civilization, which of course is also a product of human nature. This paradox of “nature against something that is also nature” – to borrow a phrase that Nietzsche would coin nearly a century after the Romantics – captures a central concern of the philosophy of authenticity: the “true” or “natural” self stands in opposition to whatever is inauthentic or constructed, but this also derives from human agency. The collection of selves in an ordered society ironically pollutes the selfhood of each of its members. Hence Rousseau viewed modernity “as both the nadir of man’s self-alienation, and, simultaneously, the medium for his full self-liberation” (Berman 131).

Fourth, in line with its critique of modernity, Romanticism as a movement reacted to the immediately preceding reign of reason during Europe’s Enlightenment. Advocating a return to emotion, some major figures of Romanticism, including Hölderlin and Wordsworth, stressed the natural guidance of feelings in living a fulfilling, ethical life. The “inner voice” that best expressed one’s true feelings was associated with childhood (an uncorrupted state of being) and thought to be discoverable through creativity and art.\(^5\) Authenticity thus became associated with intuition as opposed to reason, spontaneity as opposed to deliberation, and with creativity in all its forms. It is probably for this reason that artists and writers have often been lauded for their supposed authenticity.

All four of these aspects of the Romantic fascination with authenticity have persisted in various forms to the present day, informing – whether consciously or not – our treatment of the

\(^5\) This belief persisted among post-Romantic artists. According to Rilke, “[t]o be an artist, one must become authentic. . . . to be authentic is to become an artist” (Guignon, On Being Authentic 74).
subject. Throughout this thesis I will re-visit the assumptions and puzzles that were raised for the first time by Rousseau and his contemporaries. Most important to emphasize, however, is that the Romantic view favoured a fundamentally essentialist model of the self, according to which one could be brought into alignment with oneself simply by attending to the proper cues. The ideal promised for each person a state of wholeness and inner harmony that could only be achieved by personal effort, and whose achievement indeed constituted the purpose of life.

Prevalent among the reactions to the Romantic view of authenticity was the suspicion that such wholeness was a naïve expectation that was bound to disappoint. Since approximately the late nineteenth century, it has been more common to point out the manifest ways in which the self can be divided, ungrounded, misled, and misleading. It is not clear, on this less sunny view, what “being true to oneself” requires, or even whether it is possible. Accounts of personal identity from the post-Romantic era tend to stress ‘losing oneself’ rather than ‘finding oneself,’ and multiplicity rather than wholeness or oneness. By the time authenticity was dealt with by Heidegger in the 1920s, essentialism, and the prospect of self-discovery, were decidedly out of vogue.

My argument picks up at this important juncture, beginning with a detailed analysis of Being and Time. Unlike Guignon and Taylor, I focus on accounts of authenticity provided in the twentieth century alone, and my purpose is not to provide a comprehensive tour of the tradition. Instead, I take the existentialist treatments of authenticity as a springboard and examine the ways in which they are both instructive and deficient, and how they have

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6 Consider the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Mann in contrast to the philosophers and writers of the Romantic period.

7 For instance, I am skipping entirely over the views of Jaspers, Lonergan, and many contemporary philosophers of personal identity. It is also worth disclaiming that my project completely excludes the contributions to the authenticity literature deriving from non-Western philosophy, in particular the Chinese philosophy of Buddhism and Zen. While it is my impression that the general concepts at work in Eastern debates about authenticity are analogous to the essentialist and existentialist conceptions discussed here, I shall make no attempt to reference or comment on such concepts.
influenced subsequent thinking on this topic. This approach works independently of a protracted overview of Western philosophy because, first, the existentialists broke substantially from earlier thinking about the structure of identity, and second, I approach my reading of existentialism from a pre-textual metaphysical framework that I outline in Chapter 1. For now, I want to extrapolate from the pre-twentieth century accounts of authenticity the intuition that being true to oneself entails a particular model of selfhood, on which the inner self can be distinguished from the outer and the former can be known through some first-person channel. The appeal of authenticity has always been that attending to this inner self guarantees a life that strives to express and actualize truth – and not just any truth, but a truth that is unique to me as an individual. It is no wonder that authenticity has served as an ethical ideal for so many centuries and continues to compel us today.

II. The Politics and Culture of Authenticity

After Heidegger and Sartre presented their novel accounts, authenticity was not a popular scholarly topic in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet despite its recent unpopularity in academic discourse, authenticity has become a defining value of North American culture, and indeed shaped some of the social institutions and political categories we recognize today. In the 1950s and 1960s authenticity was the buzzword of “The New Left,” a large political movement that sought to transform American society. Rossinow writes:

Amid conditions of broad affluence, mass consumption, the bureaucratization of many areas of social life, and increasing disengagement from formal political participation, feelings of weightlessness migrated down the social scale…leading to a widespread yearning for authenticity. (5)
Employing existentialist language, many affluent American “young people…talked all the time about becoming ‘real’ or ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ and about transcending their generation’s ‘alienation’” (Rossinow 5). Students for a Democratic Society, the influential social movement of the 1960s, was formed largely in order to facilitate the individual’s quest for authenticity, a project that members connected with greater social equality, improved democratic participation, and the radicalization of universities. Consequently liberal politics adopted the ideal of authenticity as an antidote to the perceived conservatism, materialism, and alienation of post-war American society.

Interestingly, however, the ideal of authenticity in the American social-political context did not fade along with the energy of rebellious New Leftists. On the contrary, authenticity has been co-opted by almost every political perspective since the 1960s:

Americans – left, right, and middle – now look for authenticity, for reconnection to the divine and to communities that seem ancient and organic. The search for authenticity has become, in fact politically promiscuous . . . The search for authenticity has become so pervasive a yearning in the Unites States, its open expressions so chockablock in our popular culture and so evident across the political spectrum, as to render it less clearly a dissident, much less a specifically leftist, resource. (Rossinow 340)

Rossinow’s observation is easily corroborated. Today authenticity is used as a benchmark of character, a virtue perhaps more important than intelligence or compassion, in our assessment of leaders and politicians. In the 2008 Republican primaries, for example, Mitt Romney’s

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8 Their vision of an improved society is detailed in their manifesto, “Port Huron Statement” (June 15, 1962).
unpopularity was attributed to his supposed “inauthenticity,” whereas the come-from-behind winner Barack Obama was continually praised for his authenticity.9

Although few North Americans have read Rousseau or Herder, the Romantic ideal, stripped of some of its naturalistic emphasis, continues to hold an impressive amount of currency today. This might be partly a carry-over from the New Leftists and the popularity of Sartre and Camus in the 1960s, but, as Charles Taylor points out, the culture of authenticity has also coincided with a general rise in individualism and the softening of ethical norms (Ethics 2, 44-45, 60). Each of these influences stresses the average individual’s ability to create or discover truth from strictly personal resources. It seems that everyone is trying to achieve the elusive ideal of being authentic, however poorly delimited the concept. A recent cover of Psychology Today advises: “Dare to Be Yourself: 8 Rules for Authentic Living.”10 Popular psychology and pseudo-philosophy sections in bookstores burst with volumes peddling get-authentic-quick schemes and suggestions for finding the “deep self” that has been displaced by superficial twenty-first century preoccupations. Some representative titles include:

Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education
Creative Authenticity: 16 Principles to Clarify and Deepen Your Artistic Vision
The Spirit Recovery Meditation Journal: Meditations for Reclaiming Your Authenticity
The Art of Waking People Up: Cultivating Awareness and Authenticity at Work


10Some of the rules are: “Be deliberate . . . But not too deliberate” and “Cultivate solitude . . . But stay connected” (Wright 75).
I introduce these publications, which I will not explore further, for two reasons. First, they are important evidence for the phenomenon that motivates this enquiry, which extends beyond academic philosophy and into the cultural imaginary at large. The last several decades in North America (and to a lesser extent in Western Europe) have been marked by a definitive concern, one might even say obsession, with authenticity. It is as though in our present age of mass production and sophisticated simulacra, people are constantly afraid of being duped. Since virtual reality might legitimately be mistaken for reality, the “true identity” of everything from automobiles to soluble coffee has suddenly become pressing. Moreover, the inauthenticity of the modern self has been announced as a pervasive and regrettable phenomenon in need of

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11 This book, the synopsis reads, “[i]nspires you to shed the masks, get real about who you are. Goes deeper into why we hide and pretend to be what we aren't and strive to be what we think will bring us acceptance and love. It's all a deception. God created you unique, for a purpose. Discover what that is.”

12 Further studies of this phenomenon are David Boyle’s Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life and Miles Orvell’s The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940.
immediate remedying. The retrieval of authenticity in the philosophy of personal identity – the
subject of the remainder of this thesis – no doubt reflects and feeds into this larger authenticity
frenzy.

The second point to emphasize here is that authenticity is invariably presented not only
as a meaningful concept, but more specifically as a virtue. The literature cited above hardly
deals with the neutral academic question, central to this thesis, of whether the concept of
personal authenticity is metaphysically tenable, much less the metaethical question of whether
authenticity is good. Instead, in most explorations of authenticity, the subject’s value is the
unstated rationale for as well as the conclusion of the study. There is no controversy over
whether the hypothetical authentic self would be a good self to be. This tacit attitude toward the
meaning and value of authenticity indicates a defiance of the disparaging criticism leveled by
certain post-existentialist scholars, who rejected the concept as “jargon” masquerading as ethics,
a “profane language” presenting itself as sacred (Adorno 12). (Ironically, this view implies that
authenticity is itself inauthentic.) A belief in the value of authenticity has clearly outlasted an
entire generation of academic scorn. I will return to the value of authenticity in the final
chapter, once we have investigated the metaphysical questions in more depth. In the meantime,
I undertake this inquiry in the belief that it might be useful to parse academically what has
already been embraced as defining cultural value and shown resilience as a concept. As will
become clear, the authentic self I am interested in locating is not exactly what Oprah Winfrey
has in mind; but we could better explain the enthusiasm that millions of North Americans
express for it by identifying the logic behind such an ideal.

In Chapter 1 I provide a conceptual analysis that indicates what we should expect from
an account of authenticity and how personal authenticity differs from the authenticity of
inanimate things. I argue that the structure of authenticity is essentialist, and that its application to persons is therefore prima facie counterintuitive as long as we understand selfhood as dynamic and open-ended. With this concern in mind, I proceed to critique the influential accounts of authenticity in twentieth century existentialism.

Chapter 2 is an in-depth investigation of the account of authenticity provided by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*. I study each step in his analytic of Dasein to determine what authenticity consists in for a being that is concerned with its own being, but otherwise anonymous. I argue that Heidegger’s account of authenticity collapses into the exercise of fundamental ontology itself, and fails to provide identifiable directives for achieving authenticity or differentiating it from its opposite.

In Chapter 3 I subject Jean-Paul Sartre’s work to similar scrutiny, beginning with his discussion of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* and moving through his treatment of authenticity in various other works. I argue that his conception of authenticity as assuming the radical freedom of being-for-itself is at odds with the metaphysical demands of the concept, and also fails to indicate how one should choose among one’s possibilities. More significantly, his ontology precludes the use of character traits and identity language in general. Simone de Beauvoir’s account of authenticity and bad faith has several advantages over Sartre’s, which makes it slightly more compatible with an ethics of authenticity, but just as incompatible with the metaphysics of personal identity.

In Chapter 4 I review some of the reactions to Heidegger’s and Sartre’s accounts of authenticity. The chapter has two main sections: in the first, I discuss the backlash against existentialism (particularly Heidegger) and the subsequent rejection of authenticity in the continental tradition, which revolved around a re-thinking of humanism and subjecthood in
post-war Europe. In the second section, I summarize the revival of authenticity in the philosophical literature of the last two decades, which has focused on defending existentialism from anti-humanist charges and retrieving authenticity as an ethical possibility. I conclude that both dismissing Heidegger and Sartre and vindicating them are extreme positions that miss the intrigue and challenge of the problem of authenticity in personal identity. Moreover, I claim that any account of authenticity must eventually refer concretely to who a person is, and the accounts of the existentialists, as well as that of Charles Taylor, are unable to meet this essentialist requirement.

Chapters 5 and 6 appeal to a variety of contemporary sources in an effort to reveal what, if anything, we can say definitively about the self. In Chapter 5 I leverage arguments made by Frankfurt, Parfit, Brink, and Ricoeur to examine the relationship between personal identity and specific actions, beliefs and desires. I argue that authenticity demands temporal bias toward the present, but we cannot gauge the authenticity of a particular action in light of its conformity to previous trends of behaviour because character and personality evolve over time. In Chapter 6 I consider selfhood in its social context and argue for a distinction between authenticity and other traits that are often associated with it, such as originality, sincerity, and madness. Here I make use of Trilling’s excellent text, Sincerity and Authenticity, as well as literary examples and identity politics. I conclude, against Sartre and Judith Butler, that sexual orientation is an essential trait that can manifest itself in either authentic or inauthentic behaviour, but that it is exceptional in this respect.

Chapter 7 brings the thesis to a conclusion by presenting a constructive account of authenticity and analyzing our reasons for valuing authenticity as much as we do. I contend that authenticity consists in a correspondence between one’s situational behaviour and the beliefs or
dispositions revealed to be essential to that person in such a situation through critical reflection.

After defending my account from some objections, I consider the consequences of such a theory and whether we should indeed aspire to be this way. Finally, I analyze the instrumental and intrinsic value of authenticity, both of which are related to our interest in truth and truthfulness. I conclude by suggesting that inauthenticity might be valuable in its own right, and that the borders between authenticity and inauthenticity are becoming increasingly porous.
CHAPTER 1

THE STRUCTURE OF AUTHENTICITY

Before beginning my review of the existentialist literature on authenticity I want to examine the concept of authenticity a priori, using our intuitive applications as a preliminary indicator of its meaning. This brief conceptual analysis will help to reveal the structure of authenticity and serve as a kind of benchmark for other accounts.

The approach of conceptual analysis risks being overly reductive and scientific – especially when juxtaposed with twentieth century German and French thought – but I believe it is not only justified, but highly instructive. As a cursory overview of the tradition has already demonstrated, authenticity can arise from a variety of beliefs about the self, ethics, and society. I am interested in establishing why a single word has come to refer to these assorted phenomena, as well as what the most appropriate use of this word would be. A pre-textual analysis of authenticity as a property of persons and things will help to illustrate what is native to the concept and what is only incidental, and consequently where it may be used appropriately and where it applies at best metaphorically or indirectly.

Throughout this thesis I argue that authenticity, when properly understood, is very hard to attribute to persons. This does not mean that existing accounts, which reject my structural criteria, are uninformative, but it may mean that they are not defining something that is best described as authenticity. I want to know why we should call something “authentic” instead of any number of other adjectives that can be used to describe a person or her behaviour. This requires beginning with a solid understanding of what ‘authenticity’ uniquely denotes.

I begin by identifying the three primary usages of “authenticity” and the features they have in common; this will allow for a generic formulation of the concept. I then indicate
how the structure of authenticity is problematic when applied to the search for the authentic self, because of the ways in which selfhood differs from other things to which authenticity applies. I will also demonstrate, for now in sketch form, why Heidegger and Sartre are at pains to provide a coherent account of authenticity, given their other philosophical commitments. Part of my purpose in this exercise is to show, not that there is no hope for a philosophical account of personal authenticity, but that its requirements may be more demanding than have previously been thought.

I. The Good Turtle Soup or Merely the Mock?

“Authenticity” is used in many contexts outside the philosophy of personal identity, and all of these connotations may come to bear on our understanding of authenticity in the personal sense. I treat the concept of authenticity as a unified one, which has certain consistent features regardless of where it is applied. I suspect that there is something that unites our different uses of the term, something that is also instructive about how we understand selfhood and identity. By drawing attention to the distinguishing characteristics of authentic things with which we are familiar, I hope to shed light on the properties of the elusive thing we call an ‘authentic self’. For clarity, I distinguish between three uses of the term “authentic,” but as I shall argue, the fundamental sense remains unaltered in each application. It is helpful to identify the three main colloquial uses of the term in order to illuminate some of our intuitions about what it means.

In the first sense, “authentic” is used as a synonym for “original” as in being continuous with an originary entity. The fifties-style diner down the street is authentic in this sense if it actually opened in the 1950s and was typical of the era, but continued to exist in a
more or less unchanged form to the present day. It is to be distinguished from a diner that
was built in 1990 and decorated to look like a fifties diner in an attempt to conjure up images
of the authentic one. Entities in this category, in other words, must have the proper kind of
history, and it is only with the passage of time that their authenticity comes to matter. No
one, upon beholding a restaurant opened in 2009, would ask if it were an “authentic” 2009
restaurant.

In the second sense, authentic is used as a synonym for ‘real,’ as opposed to ‘fake’. When we refer to things this way, we also imply that they emanate from the source they
claim to emanate from, although they need not be numerically the same as a historical entity.
Ethnic cuisine, semi-precious stones, and works of art are authentic in this sense. Chinese
food is authentic if the recipe and the ingredients are actually used in China. Pearls are
authentic if they come from oysters. Van Gogh paintings are authentic if they were actually
painted by Vincent Van Gogh. In each of these cases, it is easy to think of inauthentic
replicas: American-Chinese food, glass pearls, and imitation Van Goghs. What separates
these ‘fakes’ from their authentic counterparts is their source or their content, not their date
of origin. When Cole Porter asks, “Is it the good turtle soup or is it merely the mock?” he is
asking, is the turtle soup made of turtle, or is it made of some cheap alternative? Authentic
in this sense is cognate with “genuine,” “the real thing,” “the real McCoy,” and so on. The
inauthentic things in this category are usually dismissed as shams, unauthorized copies, or
junk. They are accordingly valued much less. Knock-offs of Louis Vuitton handbags can be
purchased on Canal St. in New York for twenty dollars; an authentic Vuitton can run in the
thousands of dollars.
There are exceptions to the general equation of truth-telling and value in this category. Some inauthentic things are conspicuously inauthentic and make no attempt to pass themselves off as the real thing. We might term them “genuine fakes.” Impossibly large fake pearls are an example. Manufacturing pearl look-alikes that are larger than real pearls could ever be and making them in such a way as to draw attention to the plastic moulding that verifies their fakeness is evidently not an instance of the inauthentic aspiring to authenticity. Genuine fakes do not “lie” about what they really are. Nonetheless, their own truthfulness only becomes meaningful in virtue of their ironic relation to real pearls. The authentic things set the standard by which genuine fakes achieve their own status as real things of a different kind.

In the third general usage, and the one most obviously associated with personal identity, “authentic” means ‘honest,’ ‘at one with oneself’ or ‘genuine.’ As in the other two uses of the word, “authentic” here implies a convergence between what something is and what it claims it is. Notice that the original diner is authentic because it is continuous with the diner that was built in the 1950s. And the turtle soup is authentic because it converges with what it claims to be – soup made from turtle meat. When we say that someone is authentic, we mean that her behaviour converges with who she actually is; she does not “pretend to be someone she’s not.”

In the rest of this project I shall only be concerned with the authenticity of persons. I am not suggesting that personal authenticity is entirely analogous to the authenticity of inanimate things – a point upon which I shall later elaborate – but I have presented them together in order to extrapolate common features that might be indicative of the category as a.

13 These putative synonyms require much more interpretation before we can use them as substitutes for ‘authentic,’ but common usage make them interchangeable.
whole. I contend that although we use “authentic” to refer to a variety of things – social institutions, cuisine, semi-precious stones, speech acts, and many others – the underlying judgment in each application is the same: the authentic thing is truthful in a way that an inauthentic thing is not. Authentic things and people are what they claim to be. Depending on the type of thing in question, “authentic” may be replaced by different words – “real,” “original,” “sincere,” and so on – but because they are held together by this crucial property of truth-telling, there is a strong argument for thinking of authentic things as a category, and all of the replacement words as incomplete synonyms. The theory of truth at work in these examples is something like a correspondence theory of truth, but we will see how truth continues to be inseparable from authenticity on other accounts as well. Even in Heidegger’s terminology, where truth is the disclosure of being, authenticity is intimately connected with truth.

From the preceding definitions, some of the characteristics of authenticity have already come to the fore. We have seen that in every intuitive application of the concept of authenticity, there are multiple entities at stake. I designate them as follows: first, the thing that is said to be authentic (a pearl, a painting, an action, a diner, or a person); second, the thing with which the first one converges (such as the diner built in 1950, or the stone found in an oyster); and third, the thing or things which are excluded by the first two, i.e. whatever counts as ‘inauthentic.’ Authenticity, in short, arises from the convergence between the first and the second entities to the exclusion of the third. I take it as indisputable that in order for anything to be authentic, there must be some conceivable way in which it could have been inauthentic – hence the third category. If there were no such thing as fake pearls, we wouldn’t bother to distinguish the authentic ones. Only to those things that can be somehow
inauthentic can the virtue of authenticity even hypothetically apply. Not everything – indeed, probably very few things – have the ability to be designated as authentic.

Is a person one of those things?

Some disclaimers are in order before tackling this question. A conscientious philosopher must acknowledge the thorny question of what constitutes a “person” before she can attribute any adjectives to it. In defending a definition of personhood, however, one has already made some claim about authenticity – what it is to be a “real” person – and this circularity threatens to derail the question of authenticity itself. Since I am not interested here in opening the philosophical debates about personhood, I will point out the different ways that we employ the language of personal authenticity and then shelve this discussion until a later point. Sometimes we use authenticity to describe a specific action: “His squeal of delight was authentic.” Sometimes we use it to describe a trend of behaviour or a disposition: “Her interest in soccer is authentic; she doesn’t watch it just to please her husband.” Finally, we also use authentic to describe a life or a person as a whole. This is arguably the highest virtue and compliment of all. One wants to be remembered at her funeral as an “authentic person.” One strives not only to make isolated authentic choices, but to lead an “authentic life.”

It is not necessary at this point to decide which of these uses captures the actual meaning of authenticity. Personal authenticity must always have something to do with one’s behaviour, but whether it can be adjudicated on the basis of a single action or requires a longer sample is a delicate question, to which I will return. Philosophers have disagreed

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14 “Action” here might be replaced with “choice.” In the existentialist literature in particular, it is the authenticity of choices that is most at stake. Like actions, they are punctual events rather than extended dispositions, so I group them together.
about to what extent, how often, and for how long a person may be called authentic. For now, we are interested in whether the aforementioned structure of authenticity can apply in any way to a person. The best way to do this is to re-visit the three senses of authenticity drawn from informal usage and to see how they fare in the context of personal identity.

II. Personal and Impersonal Authenticity

As we have seen already, wherever authenticity is used, its force hinges on the importance of some fact or truth. Inauthentic things are apt to mislead: they appeal to something real but fall short; they lie. Authentic things tell the truth: they are what they claim they are. For personal authenticity to conform to this account there must be an independent ‘truth’ about a person, a truth that is reflected when she is being authentic, and hidden when she is being inauthentic. These are hefty requirements. In the first place, they assume that there are different ways (at least two) of being a given individual, and that one is ‘truer’ than the other. In the second place, they demand a great deal of information about both facets of the individual, lest the whole conception of authenticity collapse because it cannot be distinguished from its counterpart. While it is possible (at least in principle) to verify the authenticity of a diner or a painting by Van Gogh – that is to say, we know precisely which facts would settle the matter – it is a much more slippery task to identify authenticity and inauthenticity in a person, and to defend the distinction. Does a person have anything in common with a diner or a painting?

If a person can be authentic in the sense of “original,” the authentic behaviour could be thought to converge with some fact about the person’s origin or original state. By

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15 Corey Anton, for instance, claims that authenticity “exists only as a habit . . . we cannot be authentic every once in a while,” but many philosophers talk about authenticity as only being possible in a particular moment (156).
“original” I refer to the above definition, i.e. historically original. I do not mean “unique,” “one of a kind,” or “creative,” although these attributes certainly appear to have something in common with authenticity, as I will later show. If authenticity is the same as historical originality, I might be acting authentically if my behaviour is consistent with how I used to behave, or how I behaved at a time when I knew that I was behaving authentically (although this invites a regress). This definition is problematic because, first, it leaves open the important question of what counts as “original,” and, second, it destroys the intuition that authenticity is an evolved or mature state of being. We tend to frown upon behaviour that reverts to patterns from a less evolved state of maturity, whereas we tend to laud behaviour that appears to be “authentic”.

On a slightly more metaphorical understanding of “origin,” we could interpret the authentic individual on this view as retrieving some primordial or deterministic aspect of her self, which may only come to fruition late in life but existed as a seed from birth (or earlier). This is close to the conception of authenticity implied in fictitious sagas where a character is “destined,” because of bloodline, prophecy, or divine intervention, to fulfill a certain identity. It also hints at the Protestant Reformation notion of having a vocation, i.e. a ‘calling,’ or a specific purpose in life. Being authentic in this sense could imply following a journey toward the identity that was determined for you, without precluding inauthentic or inconsistent behaviour along the way. This is plausible only if we are prepared to accept destiny or determinism as having an effect on personal identity. I would rather not defend such metaphysical and spiritual assumptions.

Authenticity in the second sense of the word is difficult to square with our usual intuitions about personal identity. The only way to make sense of the self as ‘real’ in the

\footnote{See Taylor, Sources 234-247.}
way pearls can be real is to assume the existence or at least the possibility of a ‘fake’ self, like an impostor posing as the real me. This brings to mind cloning or twin-Earth scenarios in which there is more than one person with exactly my DNA (and perhaps memories, desires, etc. as well). In order for authenticity to apply to these examples, one of the clones or worlds must be ‘real’ in a way that the other is not. If authenticity is applied to personal identity in this way, the problems are two-fold: first, the authenticity and inauthenticity do not reside in the same individual, but rather require multiple instantiations to be borne out; and second, although putatively identical, there must be some feature by which one of these instantiations can be said to be “authentic” as compared to the other(s) (maybe because, as in the previous definition, it was there first). This conception of authenticity does not look promising if we wish to describe numerically unique individuals as being authentic or inauthentic.

Reality is invoked in discussions of personal identity, but not in the way I applied to pearls and turtle soup. We sometimes talk about “the real me,” referring not to a discrete being but to certain preferences or behaviours that are supposedly more characteristic than others. For instance, a reformed criminal might acknowledge that he used to be a thief, but now insist of his new profession that “this is the real me.” Ontologically this is quite different from saying that one Van Gogh is a fake and another is real.

The third sense of authenticity I discussed is closest to the one intended by most philosophical treatments of authenticity, as well as non-academic discourse. Being authentic is generally understood as saying what I really mean, doing what I really believe, or simply “being myself,” that is, acting in accordance with something fundamental and unique about myself. This is entirely consistent with the cardinal truth-telling function of authentic things.

17 See, for example, Parfit 200-218.
But then what is the truth about myself? Whatever it is, it cannot be discovered under a microscope or in a historical archive. Moreover, if being authentic means being true to myself, then being inauthentic must mean missing the truth about myself. But this sounds counterintuitive. How can I be mistaken about myself?\(^\text{18}\)

This is where the distinction between authentic persons and authentic things comes into sharpest focus. An authentic pearl portrays itself accurately to others, and a fake pearl lies to others; but in no way can any pearl have a truthful or deceitful relationship to itself. Personal authenticity, by contrast, hinges on the truthfulness of the relationship of the authentic or inauthentic entity to itself, and hence involves an epistemological as well as a metaphysical mystery.

We also use authenticity to refer to the way a person relates to others – i.e. sincerely or insincerely – but this phenomenon is easily interpreted. Authenticity understood as sincerity toward others contrasts with lying, posing, or pretending. The expected convergence here is between what one says she wants, believes, etc., and what she actually wants, believes, etc. I’m authentic if I’m not pretending to be turtle soup; I actually am turtle soup. There is certainly debate to be had over which facts about oneself must be correctly portrayed on this account, as well as how to judge the correctness of the portrayal, but no matter the ruling on these technicalities, the existence of something resembling facts about myself that can be conveyed to others is relatively non-contentious. People have desires; people have beliefs; they may act in ways that either inform or betray others as to their content. I am not interested for the moment in fleshing out precisely what it means to be

\(^{18}\) Berman expresses this perplexing feature of authenticity thus: “There is something strange about [the concern with authenticity]. It seems to violate the most basic principle in logic, the laws of identity, that A is A. After all, isn’t everyone himself already? How can he help being himself? Who or what else could he be? To pursue authenticity as an ideal, as something that must be achieved, is to be self-consciously paradoxical” (Berman xix).
taken as authentic or inauthentic with respect to these facts. The crucial point about this account for my purposes is that the individual knows certain things about herself and chooses how, whether, and to what extent to convey them to others. Only another person may be deceived or ignorant about the relevant facts in this sense.¹⁹

This is not so in the case of authentic self-relation. What is striking about the problem of authenticity in personal identity is the supposition that, contrary to intuition, I might not know or live up to constitutive facts about myself. I might not know what I desire, what I believe, or who I am, and I therefore risk betraying or cheating myself unless I discover and live up to these things. The entity with which the authentic behaviour here is supposed to converge is not outside the self, nor is it fixed in the past or locked away in an art gallery. Rather, if the truth about myself exists, it is somewhere within the very current self in question. Thus the three entities I designated earlier, which are all independent in the case of authentic or inauthentic artifacts, inhere in the case of personal identity within the very same individual. The I who is authentic is empirically indistinguishable from the “true self” with which it converges, as well as from the inauthentic I with which it does not converge. The designator ‘I’ has taken on triple duty, being the sole referent for a multitude of entities. Just as authenticity proved to be divisive in the case of inanimate things, personal authenticity necessitates a divided self. Such a self is usually imagined in archaeological terms, where the inauthentic part corresponds to superficial external layers, and the authentic essence of the self is buried “deep” below them.²⁰ The latter part contains the all-important truth that must be reflected in authentic being. This “truth” may be interpreted in any number of ways, but even if such an essentialist construction of the self is plausible, it

¹⁹ This theme is taken up again in Chapter 5.
²⁰ Hence some philosophers of identity have talked about a “deep” self. See Haji 262-263.
introduces a central epistemological difficulty: if the truth about me is couched within one apparently unified self, how can I ever know when I am being authentic? How can I be deceived about who I “really” am, and what would it mean to discover the “truth”?

III. Essentialism and a Preliminary Word on Existentialism

We can see from the aforementioned considerations that authenticity presupposes a certain metaphysical structure if it can be applied to human beings in an analogous way to its application to inanimate things. Broadly speaking, this structure is essentialist. The most straightforward definition of authenticity is a convergence between a person’s essence and her behaviour, to the exclusion of those properties that are non-essential (specifically, those that are inconsistent with or opposed to the essential ones). If this seems like an overly simplistic and implausible account of selfhood, it probably is. I am not defending the essentialist account of identity as such but merely arguing that it is what authenticity requires on the strictest definition. This premise renders the possibility of personal authenticity doubtful a priori. But before we can judge whether authenticity is indeed metaphysically outlandish we need to probe the meaning of “the true self” and “essential properties” and ask whether these concepts hold any currency, albeit of a modified sort, in a more plausible picture of selfhood.

If essentialism is the de facto structure demanded by authenticity, this premise has been well concealed throughout recent philosophical history. The views on authenticity provided by Rousseau and the Romantics are essentialist in so far as they posit the existence of a way to be oneself, unique to each individual, which can be corrupted by society (resulting in an inauthentic self) or accurately discovered and embodied. But already here
the presumed essentialism is nuanced. The core self is not conceived as a stagnant or enduring entity, as it is with the primitive authenticity of a pearl. Insofar as authenticity is connected to feelings, for example, the true self is a moving target: feelings change from moment to moment, so that “at each moment [a feeling’s] authority is absolute; it inaugurates the truth” (Starobinski 180). The true self is not uncovered once and for all, like a scientific discovery whose truth resonates indefinitely into the future. Guignon explains:

On the conception of the self that we inherit from Rousseau, self-discovery is not a matter of finding an entity that has been there all along. It is a matter of making the self in the course of the search. What comes to light as authentic truth . . . is the activity of self-fashioning or self-making itself. We just are what we make of ourselves in the course of our quest for self-definition. The important thing is the creative act itself . . . (On Being Authentic 69)

Berman echoes this reading: “The process of confessing, for Rousseau, was a process of unmasking, of differentiating, of integrating, of bringing his authentic self into being” (86).

In other words, unlike all the other authentic things we have considered, an authentic self is constantly in the process of becoming itself, even if its identity can be sustainably associated with certain essential traits. Persons resist the simplistic essentialism of objects, so that when we speak about a person having an essence we cannot mean that her identity is ready-made and stagnant. Identity, by definition, unfolds along with one’s life. Moreover, the process of becoming or making oneself is concomitant with the process of self-expression: whether through confession or other means, we do not keep our identities private, but make them manifest to others. Taylor calls this perspective on selfhood, also new in the eighteenth century, ‘expressivism.’ Not only do we come to know ourselves by
looking inward, or attending to natural cues, but we must assist in letting that natural identity come out:

to talk of ‘making manifest’ doesn’t imply that what is so revealed was already fully formulated beforehand. . . . I am taking something, a vision, a sense of things, which was inchoate and only partly formed, and giving it a specific shape. In this kind of case, we have a difficulty in distinguishing sharply between medium and ‘message.’

(Taylor, *Sources* 374)

Surprisingly, then, the Romantic view of authenticity is in some ways farther from essentialism than it is from more modern views of the self.21 The Romantics’ ideal remains conservative by comparison to these more modern theories in virtue of its adherence to naturalism and the belief that individuals each have a unique way of being human, accessible through pure inwardness. For more recent proponents of self-creation, there might be no truth about or access to something like a metaphysically unique, uncorrupted identity, but only undifferentiated, purposeless being.

Indeed, it is surprising to find some of the most influential twentieth century literature on authenticity in the existentialist tradition, which by definition opposes itself to essentialism. On a worldview where there is no “human nature” but only the “human condition,” where being is marked by choosing and doing, and where nearly all contingencies can be “transcended” if not controlled, it is curious to find the implicit message that one ought to “be oneself.” Heidegger and Sartre simultaneously eviscerate the assumption of a true self and champion authenticity as a way of life that best reflects the free and value-neutral basis of human existence.

21 Guignon elaborates: “Rousseau conceives the imperative, ‘Be yourself,’ not as telling you to shape yourself according to the requirements of an antecedently given essence, but as directing you to accept that your creative activity of self-making is the ultimate source of your own being” (*On Being Authentic* 70).
One might suppose that the existentialist notion of authenticity is simply categorically different from the concept we have been treating thus far, and therefore immune to the metaphysical criteria I have set out. But many clues in Heidegger and Sartre suggest that in fact they are talking about the same concept as is implied by authenticity in other contexts. Both Heidegger and Sartre portray authenticity in familiar ways: as a mirror of personal identity, which captures something significant about a person’s character; as a desirable, fulfilling, and particularly individual way of living; and as distinct from conformism, superficiality, and self-deception. So while the ontology of existentialism seems to preclude the beliefs that most obviously underwrite the possibility of authenticity, other aspects of the tradition point decisively toward features of authenticity that we would expect in any sensible account.

Existentialism thus provides an interesting and important test case for any analysis of the concept of authenticity. If there is no true self or given fact about who I am, on what grounds can these philosophers insist that I am either authentic or inauthentic? The recourse to anti-essentialist language does not dispel the urgency of this justification. Regardless of how it is described, the authentic self must be differentiable from some inauthentic counterpart, and thus must make some claim about who a person really is. This is most obviously accomplished on an essentialist account of the self, but twentieth century philosophers have purported to defend authenticity from quite opposite assumptions.

IV. Clearing the Ground

The purpose of these preliminary comments has been to unravel the concept of authenticity and identify what would ideally make for an account of the authentic self. I
have shown that authenticity is divisive: it creates boundaries that separate certain aspects of personal identity from others, and, without being clear about these boundaries, it deteriorates. Authentic objects are distinguishable from numerically distinct ‘fake’ ones, but an authentic self must be distinguishable from some conceivable way in which that same self might have been inauthentic. At the same time, authenticity implies a convergence between two entities or ideas. The authentic self must converge with something true about who a person is. It is in virtue of the value we place on truth that we consider authenticity to be a valuable ideal.

Consequently, it is reasonable to expect a solid philosophical account of authenticity to resolve a number of issues. First, it ought to explain what authenticity is and how it is different from both inauthenticity and a variety of other traits or conditions, such as consistency, desire fulfillment, or originality. In order to do this it will very likely have to provide a definition of the self and analyze some of the different ways that one can relate to it. Second, it ought to give some explanation of how, or at least whether, an individual can achieve and recognize authenticity in her own case. That is, it is reasonable to expect a loose recipe for authenticity and a rule of recognition that may corroborate mere personal judgment by way of some philosophical standard. Finally, if authenticity is upheld as more valuable than or preferable to inauthenticity, this superiority should be somehow accounted for. While I would not suggest that such an account is impossible, it requires very precise and persuasive explanations to get off the ground. In the last chapter I present the view that I think comes closest to meeting these requirements.

As a concept that necessarily involves some degree of subjectiveness and interpretation, authenticity is not the type of idea that we can delineate through necessary and sufficient conditions. However, we can and ought to understand it with reference to the
essentialist structure it implies, as well as the complexity of selfhood it depends upon.

Surprisingly, although the concept appears to demand essentialism, the most influential modern articulations of personal authenticity have emerged from the anti-essentialist pole. Existentialism appears prima facie incompatible with the metaphysics I have identified as prerequisite to an account of authenticity. This is not a reason for preemptively dismissing the accounts of Heidegger and Sartre, but as the next two chapters will show, a close reading of their texts confirms that existentialism and authenticity are in tension with one another.
This exploration of authenticity begins with Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. In this text the twentieth century notion of authenticity in personal identity found its first, and perhaps most influential, philosophical expression. I begin this chapter on Heidegger somewhat backwardly, however, by indicating what the account of authenticity in *Being and Time* is not, and what this chapter is not. The already enormous body of scholarship on this topic requires that I do so in order to forestall the types of discussion and criticism that are extraneous to my project.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger attempts to theorize fundamental ontology as a prerequisite to all further metaphysics and philosophical study. He focuses on one particular type of being – the being of human beings, or *Dasein* – because of its unique capacity to “disclose” or “clear” the being of being in general. Dasein is the only being whose being is to be concerned with its own being. Dasein is analyzed phenomenologically to illuminate its relationship to the world, to other beings, to itself, and ultimately, to its possibilities for being the kind of being that it is. Authenticity is the particular term that Heidegger chooses to label one of Dasein’s ways of being.¹ His discussion of authenticity occurs mostly in the second division of *Being and Time*, and is embedded in his complex account of being in general. One cannot successfully critique Heidegger’s account of authenticity without rehearsing his analytic of Dasein, and the way Heidegger idiosyncratically explains his account via the notions of anticipation, *Mitsein*, disclosedness, and others. In fact, as we shall see,

¹A “way of being” is a *Seinsweise*, or as he sometimes calls it, a ‘mode’ (*Modus*).
authenticity for Heidegger almost amounts to fundamental ontology itself, as the pursuit of the question of the meaning of being for Dasein is correlative to the pursuit of authenticity.

   The ontological framework of Heidegger’s account of authenticity means that it diverges from other views, in which authenticity is treated in connection with questions of selfhood and personal identity. Indeed, as a phenomenological-ontological account, Heidegger’s description explicitly eschews the kinds of “ontic” details (properties belonging to particular beings) that might make his account more accessible to individual selves. He is not interested in beings, except insofar as they participate in and remain distinct from Being, which renders his discussion of even the most intimate details of Dasein surprisingly impersonal. Far from providing a recipe in the way that many self-help books profess to give specific directives for leading a more authentic life, Being and Time does not even engage with questions of one’s particular being. Authenticity is a formal existential structure rather than – or at least prior to being – an individual experience.

   Heidegger’s account of authenticity is therefore a far cry from any concrete, normative accounts of what authenticity is and how to achieve it. It is not an independent theory that one can easily apprehend and compare to rival accounts. Because of its dependency on a much larger, highly abstract project – which had only been one third completed when Heidegger abandoned it¹ – it is neither very precise nor very complete. Moreover, as I will argue later, it could not be made more complete within the structure of his inquiry. Heidegger, in other words, never sat down explicitly to write an explanation of authentic selfhood, and what we attribute to him on this score is always necessarily a matter of interpretation.

¹ Heidegger had intended for Being and Time to turn into two volumes of three divisions each. Only the first two divisions of the first volume were completed.
Accordingly, this chapter is neither of two things that it could have been. It is not a scholarly interpretation of Being and Time as a moment in the history of philosophy. It is also not an attempt to reduce Heidegger’s account of authenticity to an isolated theory that could be grasped without the backdrop of fundamental ontology. I could not do justice to the former in the space and scope available here, and to do the latter would be an injustice to Heidegger. I shall instead endeavour to do something between these two options. We would like a working understanding of what Heidegger means by authenticity. I shall therefore review his account of authenticity in Being and Time via the relevant ontological methods and structures, although I do not purport to explicate these fully on their own terms. Everything I draw out of the text will be chosen to further our specific purpose. Throughout the exposition, I will argue that Heidegger’s account of authenticity is problematic and at times internally incoherent. It ultimately fails to explain the kinds of information that the reader would need to understand what authenticity might mean for her. That this was not Heidegger’s purpose in writing Being and Time does not make the result less disappointing.

I. Dasein and Being

Heidegger believes that metaphysics has always missed a fundamental antecedent question, the absence of which amounts to a detrimental oversight. The ontological difference – the proper focus of ontology – is not this or that being, but the difference between beings and being, the difference that allows us to label anything as a being at all. Beings are familiar enough, but philosophy has never (to his mind) adequately tackled the question of being as such. Heidegger notes, “[t]he being of beings ‘is’ itself not a being”
It therefore cannot be discovered the way that particular beings are. What is needed is an understanding of the meaning of being, which allows particular beings to reveal themselves to us in their being.

The pursuit of the meaning of being, however, is linked very specifically to a particular type of being: human being. For Heidegger the meaning of being can never be understood – indeed, would never arise in the first place – without the kind of being who cares about its being. Being concerned about our being is not incidental to us as humans; it is part of our very being to have such a concern. Our ‘ontic’ reality as specific beings, in other words, is inseparable from our relation to the question of being in general – ontology.

Dasein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its being this being is concerned about its very being. Thus it is constitutive of the being of Dasein to have, in its very being, a relation of being to this being. And this in turn means that Dasein understands itself in its being in some way and with some explicitness. It is proper to this being that it be disclosed to itself with and through its being. Understanding of being is itself a determination of being of Dasein. (10/12)

In Heidegger’s work, then, the meaning of being in general is naturally pursued via an analysis of the being whose preeminent ontic quality is to be concerned with this topic. Rather than speak of “humanity” or “human beings” – terms with subjectivist resonances that are unpalatable to Heidegger – he calls this being “Dasein” (literally, “there-being”).

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2 All references to Being and Time are in the form [Stambaugh/Sein und Zeit] unless otherwise indicated. All references in this chapter are to Being and Time unless otherwise indicated.

3 On this choice of word, Heidegger says the following: “And because the essential definition of this being [Existenz] cannot be accomplished by ascribing to it a ‘what’ that specifies its material content, because its essence lies rather in the fact that it in each instance has to be its being as its own, the term Dasein, as a pure expression of being, has been chosen to designate this being” (10/12).
Dasein is the protagonist of *Being and Time*. This should help us to recall that the focus of his inquiry is not individual human beings, exactly, but something more abstract: the being of humans broadly construed, the existence of such an existent independently of any examples of it. As Derrida says, “[w]e can see then that Dasein, though not man, is nevertheless nothing other than man. It is . . . a repetition of the essence of man permitting a return to what is before the metaphysical concepts of humanitas” (Ends of Man 127).

Already it is clear why authenticity in *Being and Time* will not be able to explain any ontic features of particular individuals. As a mode of being of Dasein, authenticity will best be understood as a general orientation of a particular type of being to the problem of being that concerns it, specifically, to its own possibilities for being the kind of being that it is.

While ‘ontology’ denotes the philosophical inquiry into the question of being, ‘fundamental ontology’ denotes the analysis of the being of Dasein in particular. In view of Dasein’s unique relationship to ontology, fundamental ontology is, as the name suggests, logically prior to any further ontology. So what is needed to get the meaning of being in general off the ground is a detailed existential analysis of Dasein, the being of the being that cares about the meaning of being. How is this to be accomplished?

II. Phenomenology, Ontology, and Truth

Heidegger’s methodology for tackling the question of the meaning of being is phenomenology, adapted from his teacher, Edmund Husserl. There is something to be learned about Heidegger’s account of truth and authenticity in the way he describes the appropriateness of phenomenology for his project. Etymologically, he says, ‘phenomenon’

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4 “Thus fundamental ontology, from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the existential analysis of Dasein” (11/13).
means something that reveals itself: “phainomenon means what shows itself, the self-showing, the manifest . . . Only because something claims to show itself in accordance with its meaning at all, that is, claims to be a phenomenon, can it show itself as something it is not, or can it ‘only look like . . .’” (25/29). Phenomena distinguish themselves from mere appearances, then, in their truth-telling; they show themselves to be what they are, to reflect their meaning. Hence Heidegger notes that “phenomena are never appearances, but every appearance is dependent upon phenomena” (26/30). Appearances occlude our understanding of being by concealing what beings really are. Phenomenology strives to identify the true meaning of beings by attending to phenomena, in which beings show themselves in their being. “Appearances” can be deceiving; but phenomena, correctly apprehended, are illuminating. They disclose the meaning sought by ontology.

Could the meaning of beings be ascertained using any other method? Heidegger says it could not: “Phenomenology is the way of access to, and the demonstrative manner of determination of, what is to become the theme of ontology. Ontology is possible only as phenomenology” (31/35). Where Heidegger here uses the notion of ‘demonstration’ he will later use ‘disclosure’ or ‘disclosedness’ (Erschlossenheit) to describe the desired self-exposition of beings to the philosophical inquirer. Both words signal the relationship he posits between truth and experience. Truth resides not in some inaccessible noumenal realm, independent of our observations, but rather in the experience of perceiving a being in its self-disclosure. This is why phenomenology, as a method of observation, is the singular method of study appropriate to ontology: being must show, disclose, or demonstrate itself to be apprehended. No a priori concepts can be brought to bear on the search for the meaning of
Phenomenology famously attempts to return ‘to the things themselves,’ or in Heidegger’s words, “to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself” (30/34).

Importantly, allowing beings to “show themselves” in their being is not as simple as noting our perception of concrete existents. If we see a tree ten feet in front of us we cannot automatically conclude anything about the being of the tree. Seeing a tree is not phenomenology. Phenomenology requires “letting what shows itself in the ‘beings’ within the world be seen” (59/63). This begins with straightforward perception, to be sure, but it must transcend the material in order to enter the ontological. Heidegger explains that the first step is to enumerate the things which are ‘in’ the world: houses, trees, people, mountains, stars. We can describe the ‘outward appearance’ of these beings and tell of the events occurring with them. But that is obviously a pre-phenomenological ‘business’ which cannot be phenomenologically relevant at all. The description gets stuck in beings. It is ontic. But we are, after all, seeking being.

We formally defined ‘phenomenon’ in the phenomenological sense as that which shows itself as being and the structure of being. (59/63) This passage hints at the criterion for phenomenological analysis without explaining exactly what it is. Heidegger makes clear that the understanding of being cannot be achieved by casual perception alone; but how can it be achieved? Moreover, when we take ourselves to have conducted a phenomenological investigation, how do we know that we have

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5 “‘Phenomenology’ neither designates the object of its researches [like ‘theology’] nor is it a title that describes their content. The word only tells us something about the how of the demonstration and treatment of what this discipline considers” (30/35).

6 “... was sich an ‘Seiendem’ innerhalb der Welt zeigt” (63). Stambaugh’s translation is not precise because ‘Seiendem’ is singular, but ‘beings’ is plural. A more precise translation might be: “letting what shows itself of worldly being be seen.”
successfully glimpsed the being of a being rather than some shallower information, some mere ‘appearance’? The nature of Heidegger’s methodology precludes any satisfactory answer to this reasonable question. To determine the end point of phenomenology before undertaking it is self-defeating; to impose an analytic concept of ‘truth’ at this point is to forestall the possibility of beings disclosing themselves, of clearing the truth for us. It is with some frustration, then, that we embark on our phenomenological examination of being, not really knowing what we are looking for or when we will have found it. I will later liken this moment to the pursuit of authenticity as Heidegger describes it. In both cases (the latter being an extension of the former), Heidegger’s methodology urges us to look beyond superficial and familiar veneers into an elusive and indescribable depth.

His theoretical approach decided, Heidegger knows how to proceed: he must study the being of Dasein phenomenologically, to let it show itself as it is. In the end, though, this strategy will only set the stage for understanding Dasein in its “everydayness”7; temporality, the focus of Division II of the text, will elucidate the actual ‘meaning’ of Dasein, and hence of fundamental ontology.8

III. Too Near, Yet Too Far

One of the challenges of applying phenomenology to fundamental ontology is that we are in a sense already too familiar with its subject. In fact, to consider Dasein an ordinary “subject” of study is already to miss its significance: “Dasein is ontically not only what is near or even nearest – we ourselves are it, each of us” (13/15). Fundamental ontology is

7 “By looking at the fundamental constitution of the everydayness of Dasein we shall bring out in a preparatory way the being of this being” (15/17).
8 “the analysis of Dasein is not only incomplete but at first also preliminary. It only brings out the being of this being without interpreting its meaning. . . . The meaning of the being of that being we call Dasein proves to be temporality” (15/17).
about the being that has as one of its cardinal possibilities the apprehension of such a thing as fundamental ontology. This is not how we are accustomed to regarding ourselves and our fellow humans. We have to catch Dasein “off-guard,” so to speak, in order for the usually overlooked aspects of its being – its ontological qualities – to show themselves. We are already familiar with easily identifiable ontic qualities of Dasein: qualities that apply to particular instances of this being, such as ourselves and people we know. Hence Heidegger warns that “[w]hat is ontically nearest and familiar is ontologically the farthest, unrecognized and constantly overlooked in its ontological significance” (41/43). We need to make the connection between the ontic and the ontological, but without mistaking the former for the latter.

This tension between ontological and ontic features of being will recur throughout Being and Time and ultimately the account of authenticity contained in it. But how neatly does Heidegger ultimately separate these qualities? One obstacle to maintaining this distinction in Being and Time is the fact that he uses different terminology to describe the ontic and ontological features of Dasein as opposed to other beings. What is ontological in reference to Dasein is called existential and what is ontic in reference to Dasein is called existentiell.

Furthermore, unlike in the case of other beings, in the case of Dasein, the ontic and the ontological are intertwined in a peculiar way: “[t]he ontic distinction of Dasein lies in the fact that it is ontological” (10/12).9 The meaning of Dasein is simply its existence, its mere being-there, which always occurs as something ontic.10 This means that in the ontic particularities of any given example of Dasein, we should also be able to glimpse the

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9 Consequently Dasein has both ontic and ontological, as well as ‘ontic-ontological,’ priority over other beings.
10 “The ‘essence’ [‘Wesen’] of this being lies in its to be [Zu-sein]” (39/42).
meaning of Dasein’s being – its existence: “We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself. We shall call this kind of understanding of itself existentiell [ontic] understanding. The question of existence is an ontic ‘affair’\(^\text{11}\) of Dasein” (10/12).

This assertion is puzzling when considered in conjunction with some of Heidegger’s other comments about the function of phenomenology and the way beings reveal themselves. On the one hand, beings reveal themselves in their being – not in their arbitrary individual characteristics, which are apt to lead phenomenologists astray. On the other hand, these existentiell qualities are supposed to capture Dasein’s raisonnement d’être:

the roots of the existential analysis, for their part, are ultimately existentiell – they are ontic. Only when the philosophical research and inquiry themselves are grasped in an existentiell way – as a possibility of being of each existing Dasein – does it become possible at all to disclose the existentiality of existence and therewith to get hold of a sufficiently grounded set of ontological problems. (11/13-14)

This give-and-take between what we already know about being – its ontic features – and what we are trying to learn – ontology – is a deliberate strategy that answers to the objection known as the “hermeneutic circle,” which Heidegger acknowledges and attempts to address within the text.\(^\text{12}\) Richard Polt formulates the objection as follows: “We are trying to understand Being\(^\text{13}\) by examining Dasein – but how can we grasp Dasein’s particular way of Being unless we already understand Being in general? Heidegger’s entire project seems

\(^{11}\) Angelegenheit could also be translated as “concern” or “occupation.”

\(^{12}\) See § 2 of Being and Time.

\(^{13}\) Some authors capitalize ‘Being’ (Sein) when it is used to indicate being in general, in order to differentiate it from the gerund “being” (“this being the case”) and the singular noun “being” (“my cat is one being among many”), which Heidegger renders as ein Seiendes. I preserve their choice of capitalization in my citations although I always spell ‘being’ in lower-case letters in my text.
Heidegger answers that our pre-ontological familiarity with Dasein – through its existentiell features – indicates enough understanding of being in general to begin the inquiry. As we progress, our newfound understanding of Dasein in particular and being in general will be mutually illuminating. Polt reconciles the circularity of the method thus: “on the basis of a vague understanding of Being in general, we will clarify our understanding of our own Being and use this understanding, in turn, to clarify our understanding of Being in general” (31).

In his insistence that fundamental ontology is not circular, Heidegger touts the importance of Dasein’s existentiell qualities in founding our inchoate knowledge of being in general, and our ability to ask the questions of ontology at all. But throughout Being and Time, he appears to waver on the relevance of this ontic information. Heidegger limits the scope of his analysis to the existential: he wants to analyze Dasein as such, not “this or that being”. Thus in discussing such concepts as Dasein’s worldliness, its circumspection, and later on its guilt and temporality, Heidegger adamantly excludes existentiell examples that might illuminate these existential structures. If we are to assume that he has garnered his understanding of Dasein as such through his own experiences of particular individuals, this is certainly not explicit. Heidegger presents himself as the authority on being in general, after elaborating the difficulty of letting beings “show themselves,” such that we are left to wonder whence he derives his expertise. In this sense the text is less a phenomenological investigation that we undertake alongside Heidegger than it is a report on his own ontological findings.

14 “But in fact there is no circle at all in the formulation of our question. Beings can be determined in their being without the explicit concept of the meaning of being having to be already available. If this were not so there could not have been as yet any ontological knowledge” (6/8).
What is certain is that, regardless of his lip-service to the ontic/existentiell in the early sections of *Being and Time*, the subsequent analysis focuses entirely on what Heidegger deems to be “ontological.” What results is the aforementioned abstraction: Dasein emerges as a generic, anonymous entity that represents our everyday experience of being in the world while eerily glossing over the ways in which particular instances of Dasein will embody this experience in individual ways. This approach has consequences for our ability to relate to Dasein as the being of our own being, as well as for the success of Heidegger’s account of authenticity. Without ontic analysis there can be no such thing as selfhood – a concept that seems to arise from, and concern itself with, the fact of individuation among beings of a certain kind. In the language of *Being and Time*, individuation is a function of facticity, or “the way in which every Dasein actually is,” which clearly falls within the realm of the ontic (52/56). Heidegger is not interested in providing a notion of selfhood or subjectivity as one might loosely expect from a philosopher who writes about authenticity.\(^{15}\) In *Being and Time*, authenticity must be grasped, perhaps counter-intuitively, without the expected help afforded by received ideas of the self or the specific factical choices it encounters.

IV. “To Be or Not to Be Itself”

Although Dasein refers to a type of being and not a specific being, Heidegger describes Dasein in terms appropriate to a particular agent: Dasein chooses, acts, encounters other beings, and “understands itself” (10/12). Dasein is not supposed to refer to anyone in

\(^{15}\) Where he uses these words, it is clear that his intention is to steer the reader away from a conventional understanding and situate it in an understanding of fundamental ontology. For instance: “Dasein is a being which I myself am, its being is in each case mine. This determination indicates an ontological constitution, but no more than that. At the same time, it contains an ontic indication, albeit an undifferentiated one, that an I is always this being, and not others. The who is answered in terms of the I itself, the ‘subject,’ the ‘self’” (108/114).
particular, but *Being and Time* reads at times like a third-person narrative about one anonymous individual.\(^{16}\) It becomes pertinent to ask not just “what” Dasein is (the being of human beings), but “who” Dasein is. The ‘who’ of Dasein must be understood in the context of Dasein’s possibilities, that is, the different ways it can exist. Depending on how Dasein’s possibilities are pursued, the ‘who’ of Dasein may change. Because Dasein is “always mine,”\(^{17}\) it is capable of being authentic or inauthentic: “Dasein is the being which I myself always am. Mineness belongs to existing Dasein as the condition of the possibility of authenticity and inauthenticity. Dasein exists always in one of these modes, or else in the modal indifference to them” (49/53). The availability of “modes” or “ways of being” (Seinsweise) constitutes an important feature of Dasein. Its possibilities for existence are numerous, yet they are constrained by Dasein’s temporality – the finitude of its existence. Dasein’s way of being is in temporal relation to these possibilities. Long before Heidegger spells out the specific structures of inauthenticity and authenticity, he explains something crucial about these modes. Dasein may either seize itself, choosing its own possibilities, or it may literally give up the possibility of being itself: “Dasein always understands itself in terms of...its possibility to be itself or not to be itself” (10/12).

\(^{16}\) Heidegger scholars differ on how individualistically Dasein should be understood. Taylor Carman argues that “the term ‘Dasein’ refers to any individual human being” (35) but, as Haugeland points out, Dasein is not a count noun: one can no more count Daseins than count milk. Carman responds that “Dasein mirrors the traditional . . . generic [English] term ‘man.’ Of course, ‘man’ sometimes refers collectively like a mass noun, sometimes distributively like a count noun” (39). I like this choice of synonym because it is also a homophone for the German word, “Man,” which Heidegger uses with a definite article [das Man] to describe the “who” of Dasein in inauthenticity, and is usually translated as “the they.” It is worth pointing out, however, that Heidegger occasionally slips into using Dasein as a count-noun himself. For instance: “The they, which supplies the answer to the who of everyday Dasein, is the nobody to whom every Dasein has always already surrendered itself” [“Das Man, mit dem sich die Frage nach dem Wer des alltäglichen Daseins beantwortet, ist das Niemand, dem alles Dasein im Untereinandersein sich je schon ausgeliefert hat”] (120/128, my emphasis in bold). “Alles Dasein” could be translated as “every Dasein” or possibly “all Daseins,” but in either case the adjective denotes a count noun.

\(^{17}\) Heidegger’s term Gemeinigkeit translates clumsily to “always-mineness.”
This striking claim is an example of Heidegger using a phrase that is so familiar and colloquial that we should pause before taking it at face-value. We often use expressions such as “I’m not myself today” precisely to invoke what we take to be concepts like authenticity. Is this what Heidegger has in mind? Given the breathtaking volume of neologisms and violations of traditional grammar and conventional semantics in *Being and Time*, it would be careless to read the text as “plain-language philosophy”; so how should we interpret these temptingly accessible idiomatic interruptions?

Everything that Heidegger says about Dasein must be understood in the context of its existential structure. Hence “being itself” or “not being itself” will be cashed out in terms of Dasein’s existential relationship to its possibilities for being – that is, in decidedly un-colloquial terms. This may, in turn, translate, existentially, into a mood or situation that we might describe as “I’m not myself today.” But the direction of analysis must go from the ontological to the ontic in this instance. Where Heidegger later introduces other plain-language terms, such as “guilt,” “conscience,” and even “death,” similar caution applies.

Caution is also required before we ascribe to authenticity and inauthenticity their expected values. In everyday usage, regardless of the subject matter, ‘authentic’ is a laudatory adjective while ‘inauthentic’ is typically disapproving or pejorative, and there can be no doubt that authentic selfhood, whatever that may mean, is a desirable way of living. So it is natural to read *Being and Time* as an elaboration on the meaning of authenticity in order to demonstrate its superiority over inauthenticity. Heidegger, however, insists that the terms are merely formal indications corresponding to the ontological features of Dasein: “The two kinds of being of authenticity and inauthenticity – these expressions are terminologically chosen in the strictest sense of the word – are based on the fact that Dasein
is in general determined by always being-mine” (40/42-43). He goes on to say, in a much excerpted phrase, that “the inauthenticity of Dasein does not signify a ‘lesser’ being or a ‘lower’ degree of being” (40/43). He is obviously aware of the reader’s tendency to interpret this aspect of fundamental ontology as a type of ethics – an interpretation that he adamantly denies. His project focuses exclusively on achieving an understanding of being in general via an understanding of Dasein, and his philosophical principles make clear that no further philosophical inquiry, such as ethics, can even be attempted before this task is complete.

It is nonetheless difficult for English readers, at least, to separate their common language intuitions about authenticity from the demands of fundamental ontology. Some Heidegger scholars simply disbelieve that Heidegger did not intend for authenticity to be regarded as a ‘higher’ way of being than inauthenticity. Some regard the very notion of value-free authenticity as disingenuous and credit Heidegger with having paved the road toward an ethics of authenticity despite his protestations. But we should also remember that the translation of Being and Time inevitably introduces nuances to the terms that are not identical in German. For instance, the German term for authenticity, “Eigentlichkeit,” can also mean “actuality” or “actualness,” which has perhaps less powerful ethical connotations than “authenticity”, and it stems from “eigen,” an adjective meaning “own” (as in “my own”), which supports Heidegger’s appropriation of the term to highlight Dasein’s “always being-mine.” The English word “authenticity” stems from the Greek word for self [autós], but its origin is not transparent in English usage as it would be in German.

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18 See Chapter 4.
19 The root “eigen” also appears in the word Ereignis, as in Beiträge zur Philosophie: Vom Ereignis (Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning), a later text in which Heidegger ostensibly moved away from authenticity while still describing Dasein in terms of mineness. “Ereignis” can also be translated as “appropriation” or “event.”
The question of semantic interpretation – particularly as it pertains to common value judgments – arises throughout Being and Time and prompts Heidegger to re-issue disclaimers about the non-ethical nature of his project. For example, another instance of Heideggerian loaded language is the word Gerede, usually translated as “idle talk” or “chatter,” which refers to one of the features of inauthenticity. Although the German Gerede does not contain the word or notion “idle,” Heidegger warns against attributing negative value here too: “The expression ‘idle talk’ is not to be used here in a disparaging sense. Terminologically, it means a positive phenomenon which constitutes the mode of being of the understanding and interpretation of everyday Dasein” (157/167). Despite this caveat, Heidegger defines “idle talk” as the kind of lazy, unreflective discourse that covers up the truth of being, and places this description in a list of attributes (“scribbling,” “curiosity,” “ambiguity”) that similarly connote Dasein’s failure to disclose truth. There can be no doubt that this phrase, like its fellow signs of inauthenticity, merits at least part of the disapproval that everyday language confers on it. But to interpret it in an unmodified colloquial sense is also to risk obfuscating Heidegger’s unique ontological approach.

V. “Out of Itself into Itself”

To review, what Heidegger has communicated about authenticity up to this point in the text is that it is a mode (possibility) for Dasein along with inauthenticity. As a possibility, Dasein’s authenticity is not a static condition but a constant question for its being. Heidegger will not establish the meaning of authenticity by delineating the characteristics of some lasting authentic self. In fact, Heidegger begins by explaining the nature of inauthenticity, against which something like authenticity may initially be understood. This
contrast can only be apprehended through Heidegger’s detailed description of Dasein’s everyday worldly existence.

Dasein always exists in a world with other beings; its existence cannot be severed from its environment (Umwelt). Dasein’s being is first and foremost “being-in,” meaning that it is always a being that is situated (hence dâ-sein). Moreover, Dasein is absorbed in this world: it pursues projects, understands, and engages with other beings – some as mere “things,” others as fellow Dasein. This complex absorption in its world amounts, broadly speaking, to what Heidegger calls “care” (Sorge). Care is possible because Dasein’s being is fundamentally “worldly” (weltlich). Even when Dasein is physically alone, its existence is worldly and it exists “with” other beings. Heidegger calls this existential condition “Mitsein,” meaning “being-with.” Dasein’s existence is inescapably defined by Mitsein: “Being-with existentially determines Dasein even when an other is not factically present and perceived. The being-alone of Dasein, too, is being-with in the world” (113/120).

The existential determination of Mitsein has implications for the ‘who’ of Dasein. The co-existence of human beings in their worldliness results in Dasein’s having a kind of communitarian identity. Being always there with others (“mit-da”), Dasein typically does not exhibit existential differences from others:

‘The Others’ does not mean everybody else but me – those from whom the I distinguishes itself. They are, rather those from whom one mostly does not distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too. . . . On the basis of this like-with

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20 Heidegger uses this term in a technical way, referring not (or not merely) to some geographical surrounding area but to everything to which Dasein stands in an ontological relationship.

21 This would include everything that is “objectively present” (vorhanden) as well as “present-at-hand” (zuhanden). Dasein is not objectively present.

22 I will use the German term from now on.
being-in-the-world, the world is always already the one that I share with the others. The world of Dasein is a mitwelt [Mitwelt]. Being-in is being-with others [Mitsein]. The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is Mitdasein. (111-112/118)

The effect of so many individuals (“others”) existing together in ontological interdependence is the emergence of an anonymous force called “the they” (das Man). This term is not to be understood as a pronoun for “every person in the world,” but rather as a catch-phrase for “the way people are,” “the average person,” or even the colloquial “folks.” The impersonal “they” defines what Dasein is like on a daily basis: “The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness” (119/127). Hence the they is the usual answer to the ‘who’ of Dasein: “The who is not this one and not that one, not oneself and not some and not the sum of them all. The ‘who’ is the neuter, the they” (118-19/126).

With the introduction of the they, Heidegger begins to reveal the effects of Mitsein on Dasein’s identity. For in being constantly under the influence of others – being a part of the they – Dasein undergoes a distancing from its own possibilities and ultimately veers toward not-being-itself, that is, toward being inauthentic. Ironically, then, Dasein’s everyday existence is not characterized as ‘being itself.’ The they silently dictates how life is lived in a given cultural and historical milieu: how one dresses, how one eats, what one finds humorous, and so on. While these existentiell particulars will vary depending on where Dasein is situated, the existential phenomenon of the they is an inevitable part of Mitsein. It

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23 A better translation of this invented term is “with-like,” or “with-y”.
24 This could also be translated as “the one”. In German, “man” is used the way “one” can be used in English to designate everyone and no one in particular, e.g. “One doesn’t say such things.” Levinas translates das Man as “Monsieur Tout le Monde”. “Mr. Everybody” (Entre Nous 213).
speaks to the tendency of Dasein to conform to its surroundings and blend in with the others. On the whole, Dasein exists in “averageness” (Durchschnittlichkeit), which “levels down” (einebnet) its possibilities and leaves it inauthentic. In this state Dasein is not individuated and not itself. The thoroughness of Mitdasein and the pervasiveness of the they have effectively overtaken Dasein’s identity. In a revealing passage, Heidegger explains this “disburdening” (Entlastung) of Dasein by saying that “[e]veryone is the other, and no one is himself. The they, which supplies the answer to the who of everyday Dasein, is the nobody to whom every Dasein has always already surrendered itself, in its being-among-one-another” (120/128).

In learning about Dasein’s co-existence with others, then, we have also learned a great deal about inauthenticity. The two phenomena are inseparable for Heidegger. “Selfhood,” or the “who” of Dasein, is a function of who is in control of Dasein’s possibilities. Authenticity occurs when Dasein takes control of its own possibilities, projecting itself confidently into the future. When Dasein allows itself to be overtaken by the they, it “falls prey” to inauthenticity. Lest there be any ambiguity about the connection between the they and inauthenticity, Heidegger states: “The self of everyday Dasein is the they-self which we distinguish from the authentic self, the self which has explicitly grasped itself. As the they-self, Dasein is dispersed in the they and must first find itself” (121/129).

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25 As mentioned earlier, individuation is a function of facticity – the way particular facts work out from individual to individual. A major defect of Heidegger’s account of authenticity is that, although it seems to require individuation, it fails to explain how an individuated being will be different from someone who is just “lost in the they.”

26 “In the everydayness of Dasein, most things happen in such a way that we must say ‘no one did it.’ . . . Thus, the they disburdens Dasein in its everydayness” (120/127-8).

27 The German for “project,” entwerfen, nicely illustrates the relationship of authenticity to inauthenticity and unfreedom. Heidegger speaks of being “thrown” into being and inauthenticity as a kind of clinging to our thrownness by neglecting to choose for ourselves. “To throw” is werfen, and the prefix “ent” usually negates the rest of the word, so entwerfen can literally be translated as “to un-throw” or “to de-throw.”

28 “Falling prey” is from the German Verfallen, which is also translated as entanglement. See Stambaugh 164.
Heidegger goes on to elaborate on the telltale traits of inauthenticity – “idle talk” (das Gerede), “curiosity” (die Neugier), and “ambiguity” (die Zweideutigkeit) – all of which are symptoms of Dasein being caught up in and unable to differentiate itself from the they.

Heidegger’s characterization of the they-self as “fallen” and “inauthentic” suggests that authenticity is a function of Dasein’s retreat from the world of Mitsein, and hence a more evolved or more appropriate way of being than that of everyday Dasein. This picture is not entirely inaccurate, but it also exists in tension with other information Heidegger provides. He is careful at several points in the text to insist, often contrary to neighbouring claims, that inauthenticity is a benign mode of being, equiprimordial to authenticity. Moreover, some philosophers hasten to add that authenticity cannot mean the rejection of Mitsein (which, by definition, is inescapable), so authentic Dasein is nothing like a hermetic withdrawal from the world. Heidegger casts inauthenticity in a decidedly negative light, using harshly suggestive language to describe Dasein in this state, while at the same time arguing that authenticity is just another possibility for Dasein. These apparently incompatible claims must be carefully navigated.

As we have already seen, Heidegger describes authenticity and its counterpart as “ways of being” of Dasein, both made possible by its condition of “always mineness” (Jemeinigkeit). Inauthenticity (falling prey) is not a failure of Dasein to be Dasein, but simply one way in which its existence can be carried out. Dasein’s entanglement alienates itself from its ownmost possibilities; but entanglement is itself one of Dasein’s quotidian

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29 This is not to suggest that “inauthenticity” and “everydayness” are the same. Zimmerman takes pains to separate the two notions (44-45).
30 See Chapter 4.
modes – in fact, it is “always already” (je schon) this way. Heidegger explains that “this alienation, which closes off to Dasein its authenticity and possibility . . . still does not surrender it to beings which it itself is not, but forces it into its inauthenticity, into a possible kind of being of itself” (166/178). So when Dasein is inauthentic, he contends, it is still itself, albeit in a “fallen” way. Furthermore, Heidegger anticipates future critics by insisting that “fallenness” should not be read with the metaphorical associations of inferiority or derivativeness that would render authenticity the original, and superior state of being: “the entanglement of Dasein [must not] be interpreted as a ‘fall’ from a purer and higher ‘primordial condition’” (164/176). Inauthenticity is neither a temporary defect in a given being’s existence nor “a bad and deplorable ontic quality which could perhaps be removed in the advanced stages of human culture” (165/176). It is, rather, “an existential determination of Dasein itself,” that is, just one of several ways in which Dasein can and does exist (164/176).

So while we are told unequivocally that inauthentic Dasein has “fallen away from itself” and that the “who” of Dasein is for the most part not the authentic self but the theyself, we are simultaneously told that this very not-being-itself, this very inauthenticity, is a normal part of Dasein’s existence (164/176). Not being itself is, ironically, a way of being itself. Or, as Heidegger formulates the paradox he has laid out, “Dasein plunges out of itself into itself, into the groundlessness and nothingness of inauthentic everydayness” (167/178).

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31 “je schon” should be understood existentially rather than chronologically, i.e. as continuously available regardless of existentiell factors.

32 It might, nonetheless, signal Christian connotations of falling from grace. Zimmerman argues that Heidegger’s conception of authenticity is strongly influenced by Christian motifs, and that his terms overlap with those of his contemporary Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian and scholar of the New Testament. Specifically Zimmerman believes that Heidegger “based his distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity partly on his interpretation of the ontological presuppositions of the New Testament distinction between faithfulness and sinfulness” (2). Where Bultmann uses ‘faithfulness,’ Heidegger uses ‘authenticity’; and where Bultmann uses ‘sinfulness,’ Heidegger uses ‘inauthenticity.’
What can this mean? Whence does Dasein plunge “out” and into what does Dasein plunge “in”? When is Dasein “most” “itself”? Can it ever be “not” itself?

Another way of putting this is to ask when Dasein is “not-at-home”. Heidegger sometimes uses this metaphor to describe Dasein’s experience of selfhood: “Entangled flight into the being-at-home of publicness is flight from not-being-at-home, that is, from the uncanniness which lies in Dasein as thrown, as being-in-the-world entrusted to itself in its being. This uncanniness constantly pursues Dasein and threatens its everyday lostness in the they . . .” (177/189). Uncanniness (Unheimlichkeit) is more literally translated as “not-at-home-ness.” It is connected to the attunement of Angst, which opens up Dasein to its potential authenticity. The fact of Dasein’s existence – its thrownness – is uncanny, so that Dasein is closest to itself, surprisingly, when it is least “at home.”

This only takes us so far, however, because we lack a concept of the “self” that Dasein might be or not be in the first place. This is in part because Heidegger seems to vacillate on what happens to Dasein’s self as it falls prey. He says initially: “The they, which supplies the answer to the who of everyday Dasein, is the nobody to whom every Dasein has always already surrendered itself, in its being-among-one-another” (120/128, my emphasis in bold). Here it seems clear that Dasein loses itself, albeit voluntarily, to the they, forfeiting its selfhood along with its “who.” However we are also told (in a passage already cited above) that the alienation (Entfremdung) of falling prey, “which closes off to Dasein its authenticity and possibility . . . still does not surrender it to beings which it itself is not, but forces it into its inauthenticity, into a possible kind of being of itself”(166/178, my emphasis in bold). In this passage, inauthenticity is portrayed as a type of self-possession, a variation on selfhood. Inauthentic Dasein surrenders itself and does not surrender itself; it is
Taylor Carman sheds some light on these apparent contradictions in his interpretation of the “asymmetry” between the first-person perspective of a self and another’s perspective of that self (267). He argues that the former, which would appear to correspond to Dasein’s disentangled, authentic self, is not apprehensible as a whole unit because “the self is an essentially social phenomenon…[that] emerges only in Dasein’s being-with, hence only with the admixture of a second- and even third-person point of view” (Carman 267-268). These other perspectives enable the self to be viewed as an “occurrent being,” or something like a recognizable, separate self. As soon as the self is isolated, Carman says, it ceases to be graspable as a ‘self’: “I want to suggest that there can be no impersonal metaphysics of the self, only complexly interwoven and interpenetrating phenomenologies of selfhood” (268). Because selfhood is inherently social, Heidegger’s description of the authentic self as one that has disentangled itself from others results in an incomplete account of the self and, consequently, authenticity. He intends for the moniker ‘authentic’ to mean something like “relating directly to oneself” and ‘inauthentic’ to mean “relating to or mediated by others,” but Carman argues that these notions are fundamentally dependent on one another for a whole concept of the self to emerge (270).

Carman’s analysis makes sense in the context of his larger project, which is to read Being and Time as a set of hermeneutic conditions of the subject; but one need not read this section through such a lens to note that Heidegger has run together several ideas here. Heidegger leaves no doubt that inauthenticity is both a phenomenon in which Dasein falls away from itself and one of Dasein’s possibilities for being itself, so that this negative
formulation of selfhood is ultimately a positive way of being: “[n]ot-being-its-self functions as a positive possibility of beings which are absorbed in a world, essentially taking care of that world. This nonbeing must be conceived as a kind of being of Dasein nearest to it and in which it mostly maintains itself” (164/176). From the standpoint of Dasein’s identity, “inauthentic” is a frequent yet nonetheless pejorative descriptor. Inauthenticity signifies Dasein’s not-being itself, which can hardly be interpreted as a good thing. But what is this “self” which inauthentic Dasein is not?

VI. The Meta-Modes of Authenticity and Inauthenticity

Heidegger asserts that Dasein can either be or not be “itself,” and that in fact it can do both at once. Dasein is “itself” as it “falls away from itself” and it is “itself” when in the mode of the “authentic self.” However Dasein is also “not itself” in everyday entanglement, since “everyone is the other and no one is himself” (120/128). And it is “not at home” when it is by itself, because of the uncanniness of its being-itself. None of this yet indicates wherein “being itself” is contained. In order to interpret such a claim, we would ordinarily resort to an analysis of some essential features of the being in question. Then we might be able to see how it could be both red and not red, or both strong and not strong. But Dasein has no essential or static features. The thorny question of what it means for Dasein to be “itself” or “not itself” is complicated by Heidegger’s schematic treatment of fundamental ontology through which Dasein can never be pinned down as this or that.

Instead, Dasein must be understood as finite openness – that is, as a thrown being for which there are many (though not infinite) possibilities of being. For every possibility that is pursued, there are others that are logically closed off. Because a possibility is not an actual
feature of a being, it does not behave like the traditional characteristics we use to identify beings. Needless to say, our intuitive understanding of authenticity is put to the test by this anti-essentialism. Who is Dasein, specifically, if there is nothing identifiably proper to it? All that belongs to Dasein are its possibilities – which include authenticity and inauthenticity. Authenticity is Dasein’s possibility for facing its finitude with resolute anticipation, while inauthenticity is Dasein’s possibility for falling prey to the they and covering over its own freedom. In authenticity, Dasein takes control of its possibilities, choosing for itself, while in inauthenticity, Dasein follows the crowd and surrenders its possibilities to custom and fashion.

Authenticity and inauthenticity, then, are best understood as “meta-possibilities” for Dasein. Each one is a specific type of orientation to Dasein’s possibilities for being itself. Authenticity is Dasein’s possibility for taking hold of its possibilities – what this means exactly still needs to be unpacked – and inauthenticity is Dasein’s possibility for leveling down its possibilities (this, too, remains somewhat obscure). Neither one is a static state of affairs, nor even necessarily a recognizable phenomenon. There are no specific behaviours or possibilities of Dasein, beyond the meta-possibilities, that can count universally as authentic or inauthentic. In fact, the recognition of anything as authentic or inauthentic appears to be an irreducibly subjective phenomenon, which should lead us to wonder whether the distinction can be grasped generically at all.

The internal character of Dasein’s possibility for authenticity is only underscored in the remainder of Heidegger’s text. While Division I of Being and Time focuses on the possibility of inauthenticity as Dasein falls prey to the they, Division II is devoted to the role of temporality in understanding being. It is in this context that we must approach
Heidegger’s concept of authenticity. Overcoming the tempting and alienating pull of the
they requires Dasein’s recognition of its own finitude through the fundamental attunement of
Angst. Dasein’s individual, authentic possibilities for being itself – whatever they are – can
only be understood once we have apprehended the existential notion of death. But in its very
insistence on the role of death in enabling an authentic existence, Division II confirms the
suspicion that authenticity, like our future demise, is the kind of thing that no one else’s
experiences can prepare us for as individuals, and that can only be corroborated subjectively.

VII. “Holding Death For True”

Dasein’s existence is perpetually incomplete because it unfolds through time. As
Heidegger says, “[a] being whose essence is made up of existence essentially resists the
possibility of being comprehended as a total being” (215/233) and “[a]s long as Dasein is,
something is always still outstanding, what it can and will be” (215-16/233-4). But Dasein’s
future is not infinitely open. Just as important as the possibilities that Dasein has not yet
encountered is the end, at some indefinite point, of all those possibilities – what Heidegger
calls the “possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein,” 33 or, in normal language, death
(232/250).

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of death to Dasein’s way of existing.
(By ‘death’ we mean the fact of our temporal finitude, not the last breath we inhale.) For
Heidegger, the ontology of human life revolves persistently around the fact that we will not
live forever. Death is perhaps the only possibility that accompanies us constantly, from the
moment we are born: “Death is a way to be that Dasein takes over as soon as it is. ‘As soon

33 As usual, this is rendered more concisely in German: “die Möglichkeit der schlechthinnigen
Daseinunmöglichkeit” (Sein und Zeit 250).
as a human being is born, he is old enough to die right away” (228/245). But more importantly, at least for our purposes, death is the only thing that Heidegger designates as individualizing Dasein, giving it a way out of fallenness in the they-self. Although death happens to everyone eventually, Heidegger holds that each person’s death is uniquely theirs. He claims that it is only through the appropriate relationship to its future death that Dasein can achieve authenticity.

There are five attributes of death that round out Heidegger’s existential picture of this familiar phenomenon. Together they are supposed to indicate why death is the only possibility that has the effect of forcing Dasein to confront its meta-possibility of authenticity. First, and most problematically, Heidegger calls death Dasein’s “ownmost” (eigenste) possibility. “Ownmost” means that, of all the possibilities belonging to Dasein, death is the one that belongs most properly, or most significantly, to it. An invented term, it is equivalent to using the possessive adjective as a superlative, as in: “All these belongings are mine, but my house is most mine (my ownmost).” But how can we make sense of possibilities “belonging” more or less properly to Dasein when Dasein is ontologically no more than the bearer of possibilities? The concept of “eigen,” or “own” – which is present in the German word for authenticity, “Eigentlichkeit” – is difficult to employ in this non-context, because it appears to be dependent on some definition of the self that can own things. Dasein is not a self in the usual sense of the word. The designation of death as Dasein’s ownmost possibility is therefore mostly schematic. We will return to the challenges this presents shortly.

A further implication of death’s “ownmost-ness” is that no one can die on behalf of another, phenomenally speaking. No one can assume my deathbed and liberate my body so
that I may continue living; each must endure death for oneself, regardless of whether one
dies ideologically “for” someone or something else. Heidegger extends this idea to suggest
that Dasein’s death individualizes it throughout life, not just in the moment of death.
Because Dasein’s death is non-transferable, he suggests, Dasein’s life is likewise non-
transferable. The recognition of non-transferability helps to pluck Dasein out of
entanglement in the they – where individuals effectively choose to live as though their lives
were interchangeable – and sets it on the course toward authenticity.

The second attribute of death that Heidegger identifies, which is very much bound up
with the first, is that it is “non-relational” (unbezüglich). This means two things: first, that
no one else’s death prepares Dasein for its own, and second, that Dasein is ontologically
alone when it dies. Heidegger argues that no other experience – including the death of others – is sufficiently like one’s own death to make it comprehensible by analogy. Dasein’s experiences of watching others die may in fact aggravate its everyday, inauthentic view of death as a nuisance that happens to other people, but not to me. We resort to idle talk, superficial solace, and the buzz of entangled everydayness, which is “a constant flight from death” (235/254). He goes so far as to claim that the apparently noble attempt to console the dying may really an inauthentic ruse to distance the sufferer from the ontological meaning of death, and is actually intended for the comfort of the consoler, who wants to get on with life.34

When Dasein dies, regardless of the presence or absence of others, it does so without
anyone’s help, input, or solace. This is the second sense of “non-relational.” Death is not a
“group effort,” even if many people die at the same time from the same cause. This is why

34 See 235/253-4. Levinas makes a forceful argument against this view; see Chapter 4.
Dasein must face up to its death, if nothing else: according to Heidegger, death is the one possibility that Dasein is guaranteed to experience in total existential solitude.

Third, death is “not-to-be-bypassed” (unüberholbar).\(^{35}\) This is an ontological way of phrasing the common wisdom that “you can’t cheat death.” The appropriate authentic orientation to this feature of death is anticipation, which “frees [Dasein] for it” rather than constantly evading (or trying to “outstrip”) the ever-approaching end of existence (243/264). With almost Buddhist undertones, Heidegger advocates Dasein “giving itself up” to its finitude and avoiding “clinging to whatever existence one has reached” (244/264). This approach helps Dasein to view its existence as a “whole” and thus reach its possibility of authenticity (244/264).

The fourth and fifth attributes of death respectively are that it is “certain” (gewiss) and “indefinite” (unbestimmt). Everyone knows that they will die at some point (certainty); but no one, for the most part, can know with certainty when or how they will die (indefiniteness). These attributes distinguish death from other possibilities, which are possible but uncertain. Death has a unique identity among Dasein’s possibilities, being at once guaranteed to happen eventually (i.e. beyond mere potentiality), and capable of happening at any time (though more likely to happen at some times than at others, of course). Together these features require that Dasein constantly “hold death for true,” which brings Dasein’s finitude into ontological focus:

Holding death for true (death is always just one’s own) shows a different kind of certainty, and is more primordial than any certainty related to beings encountered in

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\(^{35}\) The verb “überholen” can mean “to bypass,” “to overtake,” or “to outstrip.” Macquarrie and Robinson translate “unüberholbar” as “not to be outstripped” (307).
the world or to formal objects, for it is certain of being-in-the-world. As such, it claims . . . Dasein in the complete authenticity of its existence. (244/265)

All these features of death, then, serve to remind Dasein of its own existence in the moment. Authenticity is a function of this realization that life does not go on forever and that Dasein alone is responsible for itself when all is said and done. In order to become authentic, Dasein must start by confronting death as its ownmost, non-relational, not-to-be-bypassed possibility, which is both certain and indefinite. While it might be self-evident that death is in a category of its own among ontological possibilities, these claims still demand closer examination, particularly insofar as how they translate into authentic behaviour.

The first and second characteristics of existential death make the most challenging claims about Dasein’s potential for authenticity. The qualities of ownmost-ness and non-relationality best summarize the putative connection between the ineluctable mineness of my death and my right or obligation to live in a certain way. In the words of Jimi Hendrix, “I’m the one that’s gonna die when it’s time for me to die . . . so let me live my life the way I want to.”

Heidegger suggests that because Dasein will be the one to die for itself in the end, death confers on Dasein some special individualizing properties long before it even happens: “[d]eath does not just ‘belong’ in an undifferentiated way to one’s own Dasein, but it lays claim on it as something individual” (243/263).

This reverse-temporal relationship between future death and present life poses problems for our understanding of Dasein’s authenticity. First, until we have some further understanding of Dasein’s identity, it is awkward to apply the label “ownmost,” which suggests existentiell facts about who Dasein is, to death or any other feature of Dasein’s

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36 From the song “If Six Was Nine,” in which Hendrix also intones: “I’ve got my own world to live through and uh, huh/ I ain’t gonna copy you.”
existence. Although death might be unsurpassable and non-relational, Dasein will no doubt have trouble taking ownership of it before it has happened, precisely because it is so different from other things that we own. The “mineness” of death might be understood with respect to other things that are identifiably “mine,” but in the absence of such information, there is little hope of showing how death is Dasein’s “ownmost” possibility. It is much easier to imagine how particular things about me, such as my intellectual predilections and aesthetic likes and dislikes, constitute ontological “property” than my death. These are, however, immune to Heidegger’s analysis, belonging in the realm of existentiell accident.

Even setting aside concerns about the meaning of “ownmost,” more explanation is needed of how this future event translates into action or characteristics of Dasein’s identity in the present. Although my death will be uniquely mine in the future, the “ownmost-ness” of my death appears to provide no information about what is “my own” (hence conducive to authenticity) at the moment. Once again, ontic (existentiell) details might help to support Heidegger’s theory, but they are a priori excluded. Whereas the third, fourth, and fifth characteristics of death at least capture some of the urgency of leading the life one wants, at the end of the day, to have lived, “ownmost-ness” as a feature of death sounds suspiciously ad hoc.

There is a further layer of paradox in the “ownmost and non-relational” description of death, which is that death is simultaneously supremely individualizing, and ontologically the same for everybody. Each person gets precisely one death. For each person, death starts out with the same ontological profile. Thus, without particular information about them, my death and your death are equally non-descript. How, then, is this general ontological possibility, undifferentiated from person to person prior to existentiell factors, in each case
Dasein’s “ownmost”? It would seem that, on the contrary, the prospect of dying is the most universal, arguably most relational, possibility of any human being: if death really is the only or the most defining feature of human existence, then it is the one thing, or the most important thing, that all humans have in common. In this respect it is relational. Certainly the experience of dying might be non-relational, but since no living person has yet experienced it, finitude as such could be a point of convergence with rather than disassociation from others.

Even if death is non-relational as Heidegger claims, one might reasonably ask why this fact elevates it to such a special status, as opposed to countless other non-relational phenomena. Are there not other experiences in life that leave Dasein ontologically isolated, confronted with its own existence in an urgent and unsettling way? One might here think of emergencies, which require one to make a monumental decision on the spot, or the experience of being orphaned, or any number of other lonely life-defining moments. Heidegger asserts that death is the quintessential non-relational possibility, just as he labels it Dasein’s “ownmost” possibility, without much supporting argumentation. Why is this non-relational possibility particularly instructive about who Dasein is? Adorno raises this concern in The Jargon of Authenticity (138) and Levinas likewise casts suspicion on “[a]n inalienable identity in dying!” (Entre Nous 226). It is plausible to connect the possibility of authenticity with the fact of our finitude, but it does not follow that Dasein’s solitary demise is uniquely positioned to explain its identity.

As we saw earlier, the communal world of Mitsein is associated with inauthenticity, while authenticity is described as a solitary experience. We now see that Heidegger arrives at this conclusion because he considers Dasein’s death to be both what separates it from
other individuals and what allows it to be authentic. The recipe for authenticity has as one of its main ingredients the ontological, if not physical, separation from other people. However, much remains to be proven about Dasein’s relationship to its death and how this translates into authenticity.

VIII. Angst, Anticipation, and Authenticity

Heidegger’s account of authenticity, according to its own logic, requires some explanation of what individualizes each person, ultimately telling Dasein something existentially unique about who it is and, consequently, how to live. The fact that Dasein will die someday seems inadequate for this purpose. Heidegger nonetheless leverages the supposed individuality of Dasein’s death to explain how it comes to reach its potential for being authentic. Only when Dasein assumes the appropriate orientation toward its death—which he will call authentic being-toward-death, or resolute anticipation—can authenticity go from a theoretical possibility to a full-fledged way of being. Heidegger explains how Angst helps to steer Dasein away from an inauthentic understanding of its finitude and adopt resolute anticipation toward its death. The question here remains: how does acknowledging this ontological universal help to individualize Dasein, given that everyone will ultimately face the same end? The abstractness of death, as well as the anonymity of Dasein, mean that Dasein’s individuality remains permanently in question.

Angst is a type of “attunement” (Befindlichkeit) that brings Dasein face to face with something it knows, but rarely thinks about, and even more rarely accepts: “the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence” (245/265-6). Angst serves as a wake-up call to Dasein amidst the superficial, death-defying distraction of the they. Anticipation (Vorläufen)
is Dasein’s new existential orientation following an episode of Angst. Anticipation means neither brooding ceaselessly about one’s death nor expecting it around every corner.³⁷ Rather, in Heidegger’s terminology, it means “freeing oneself” for death (243-4/264). This entails acknowledging death as its ultimate, most eminent possibility:

Being-toward-death is the anticipation of a potentiality-of-being of that being whose kind of being is anticipation itself. In the anticipatory revealing of this potentiality-of-being, Dasein discloses itself to itself with regard to its most extreme possibility . . . Anticipation shows itself as the possibility of understanding one’s ownmost and extreme potentiality-of-being, that is, as the possibility of authentic existence.

(242/262-3)

Anticipation is clearly another quotidian word that has been appropriated here for ontological usage. We are told that it is in the nature of Dasein to anticipate (it is “that being whose kind of being is anticipation itself”) and that anticipation is a type of self-revelation in which Dasein comes to better understand the type of being that it is. All this sounds vaguely circular. We might say, more simply, that anticipation is Dasein’s recognition of itself as a finite being capable of authenticity. The definition cited above – the clearest of its type – nonetheless leaves open many questions that might occur to the reader. For instance: how does Dasein come to understand its “ownmost and extreme potentiality-of-being”? What does this insight mean for Dasein? Does Dasein exist differently once it has gleaned it? If so, how?

³⁷ “. . . if being-toward-death is not meant as an ‘actualization’ of death, neither can it mean to dwell near the end in its possibility. This kind of behaviour would amount to ‘thinking about death,’ thinking about this possibility, how and when it might be actualized. Brooding (grübeln) over death does not completely take away from it its character of possibility. . . . As something possible, death is supposed to show as little as possible of its possibility” (241/261).
These are, naturally, ontic questions that can only be attested by the individual, in whom these ontological possibilities take shape. Heidegger intends to communicate this very point: Dasein will learn about its existential possibilities only through a proper understanding of its ownmost, or “most extreme,” possibility – existential death – which we all share. Authentic (or as he also says, “resolute” [entschlossen]) anticipation of death somehow illuminates, or makes accessible to Dasein, a host of other possibilities that it had previously neglected. Once enlightened about its most important possibility, Dasein is in a position to choose authentically among more circumstantial options. The meta-possibility of authenticity transforms its relationship to its first-order possibilities.

As imprecise as this process sounds, it affords some contrast to Heidegger’s previous discussion of Dasein’s mode of inauthenticity. When Dasein has fallen prey to the they-self, its possibilities are leveled down, taken away, and hidden from its view. Inauthenticity, we may recall, is Dasein’s meta-possibility of passing over its possibilities. The they-self encourages inauthenticity by choosing many things for Dasein and, even worse, diverting its attention away from its ownmost possibility. Dasein’s understanding of death in this public space is governed by idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity. In order to take hold of its possibilities in an authentic way, Dasein must break away from this arrangement by facing up to its death. Authenticity is thus dependent on, first, Dasein realizing that it has fallen prey, and second, Dasein facing its death with resolute anticipation:

What is characteristic about authentic, existentially projected being-toward-death can be summarized as follows: Anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself... but to be itself in
passionate anxious freedom toward death which is free of the illusions of the they, factual, and certain of itself. (245/266)

There is a third event, too, that occurs somewhere in this evolution, an event that is mentioned in the above passage but becomes the axis of much argumentation shortly thereafter. Heidegger claims that authenticity also requires – or forces (the order of operations is unclear) – Dasein to be itself. We came across this formulation earlier when Heidegger asserted that fallen Dasein both is and is not itself in the mode of inauthenticity. The absence of any existentiell information about Dasein rendered this distinction – or the concept of Dasein’s “self” at all – effectively ungraspable. The problem is more acute now, as Heidegger proceeds to insist on the correlation between authenticity and selfhood. By connecting authenticity with Dasein’s elusive “self” he threatens to turn “authentic” into an empty referent.

As with the phrase “ownmost,” this phrase “to be itself” only makes sense by appeal to an entity identifiable as the said self. To say that death is Dasein’s ownmost possibility is to assert that there are facts about who Dasein is, and then to claim that death is the most important or the most representative of these facts. We have seen why such a move is liable to fail in an ontological analysis, particularly since “ownmost” is apparently a synonym for “individualizing.” Likewise, to say that authentic Dasein must be itself is to allude to something certain and existentiell about who Dasein is, and then to assert that authenticity is a convergence between Dasein’s essence or character (its self) and its current way of being. This is the crux of the problem of authenticity. But Heidegger has already rejected the crux,
defining Dasein’s essence as no more than its existence. So what can he mean by the phrase, “[Dasein’s] possibility to be itself”?

**IX. The Summons to One’s Own Self**

Heidegger uses the metaphor of “lost and found” to describe Dasein’s status with respect to its potential for authenticity. When Dasein is “lost” in the they-self, it is in some sense “not itself,” whereas when Dasein is authentic, it has “found itself.” In both cases, it is Dasein that is lost or found, and also Dasein that does the losing or finding.

The experience of Angst that leads into authentic being-toward-death is prompted by another ontological phenomenon, called “the call of conscience.” Fallen Dasein, lost in the they-self, needs a mechanism to “find” itself again. The call of conscience can be understood as the messenger that retrieves Dasein from the who of the they-self and brings it back to the I-self by reminding Dasein of the uncanniness of its existence. Dasein is “called up” (angerufen) or “summoned” (aufgerufen) out of its superficial existence in idle chatter, scribbling, and the other activities of the they, and is guided back to its ownmost potentiality-of-being. When the call is effective, “the self is unequivocally and unmistakably reached” (253/274).

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38 He has said more about Dasein than this, but not in such a way that the meaning of Dasein’s “essence” or “being itself” can be clarified. For instance, Dasein is always in a mood; Dasein is always entangled with others; and Dasein has the potential for both inauthenticity and authenticity. But none of this information explains wherein “being itself,” as opposed to not being itself, is contained for Dasein. The assertion that inauthenticity is Dasein not being itself and authenticity is Dasein being itself merely relocates the metaphysical problem through semantics. At some point we still require information about Dasein’s self to determine when it is or is not ‘being it’.

39 “[Dasein] must first find itself. In order to find itself at all, it must be shown to itself in its possible authenticity” (248/268).

40 “The call of conscience, existentially understood, first makes known what was simply asserted before: uncanniness pursues Dasein and threatens its self-forgetful lostness” (256/277).
The call comes not from a friend, a priest, or a deity – at least, not literally – but from Dasein itself. It is as though Dasein is simultaneously completely absorbed in the they-self and, from afar, aware of its inauthenticity. Hence “the caller is Dasein . . . The one summoned is also Dasein . . . And what is called forth by the summons is Dasein” (256/277-8). In the call of conscience, then, the self summons itself to itself.

Despite this overtly substantive language, in which Dasein is described as a self that can be “lost” and “found,” Heidegger continues to envision Dasein as the being that is concerned with its being, which is radically unlike anything objectively present. The “self” summoned by the call of conscience is distinguished entirely by its ontological status of being-there, not by any substantive qualities:

this is not the self that can become an ‘object’ for itself on which to pass judgment, not the self that unrestrainedly dissects its ‘inner life’ with excited curiosity, and not the self that stares ‘analytically’ at states of the soul and their background. . . . The call passes over all this and disperses it, so as to summon solely the self which is in no other way than being-in-the-world. (252/273)

The call of conscience is therefore not an invitation for Dasein to pick apart its existentiell situation, morally, psychoanalytically, or otherwise. The call merely summons the pure, ontological “self” of Dasein and turns it back reflexively on itself: “And to what is one summoned? To one’s own self. Not to what Dasein is, can do, and takes care of in everyday

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41 Carman notes that “[t]he apparent foreignness or faraway quality of the voice of conscience…is…a function of the relative unfamiliarity of the bare fact of one’s existence as such” (294). This explanation echoes our earlier observation that authenticity feels uncanny, or not-homely.

42 There are different ways of describing the being of Dasein as opposed to the being of other things. Guignon calls Dasein “an event” or “a happening” and notes the contrast between this conception of Dasein and the notion of a “self,” which Heidegger also uses (Becoming a Self 121-122).
being-with-one-another, not even to what has moved it, what it has pledged itself to, what is has let itself be involved with” (252/273).

The self is thus an entity that can be located and reached, but cannot be identified with the psychological functions that typically designate selfhood in Western thought. This is the self that the call must find and summon to authenticity. Of course, the call of conscience is also issued by Dasein itself: Heidegger has no theological intervention in mind here. Hence the elusive “self” in question appears to take on double-duty as both caller and called, the harbinger of authenticity as well as that which needs to become authentic.

Such a claim can only make sense given a further, positive description of (or at least a criterion by which to identify) the so-called self. Heidegger here indicates what Dasein’s self is nOt – it is not “what [it] . . . can do . . . takes care of . . . [or] what it has pledged itself to” – but continually defers explaining what Dasein’s self iS. The entity that is summoned by the call of conscience, as well as the entity to which it is summoned, recede into an increasingly indefinable singularity. Although we know that the “self” in question is a reflection of Dasein’s ownmost potentiality-of-being, the abstractness of the latter makes it highly unclear what it would mean to “find” the former. The call of conscience calls up a universal ontological possibility, not a unique kernel of identity that lies buried under each individual’s exterior. Carman explains: “Conscience calls Dasein away from all its ordinary self-interpretations back to itself, but not back to any substantive or determinate conception of itself, just back to the bare fact of its existence” (293). The metaphor of “lost and found,” with its associations of enduring metaphysical entities and promise of a locatable identity, is misleading if we are looking for a concrete self.
Moreover, the call’s message to Dasein’s self is similarly devoid of identifying characteristics. The “content” of the call of conscience is empty: it contains no instructions, no concrete revelations, and no information about the identity of the “self” it has reached. Contrary to our expectations, “[t]he call does not say anything, does not give any information about events of the world, has nothing to tell” (252/273). The call does not even articulate anything all: in contrast to the idle chatter of the they, “[c]onscience speaks solely and constantly in the mode of silence” (252/273). This unusual form of communication is apt to be misunderstood. Heidegger warns that

[w]e miss a ‘positive’ content in what is called because we expect to be told something actually useful about assured possibilities of ‘action’ that are available and calculable. Such ‘practical’ directions are not given by the call of conscience for the sole reason that it summons Dasein to existence, to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self. (271/294)

Because the call does not tell us what we “expect to be told,” Dasein cannot know what the call will sound like until, or after, it happens. Indeed, we might reasonably wonder how Dasein can recognize the call at all if its form and content are so different from everyday (viz. inauthentic) discourse. What does silence sound like? What does it feel like to be “summoned” to one’s own self? For the call of conscience, as well as for authenticity generally, Heidegger offers no “rule of recognition” by which these phenomena might be verified.

The call of conscience is also hard to conceptualize because it strikes Dasein unpredictably. Heidegger stresses that “[t]he call is precisely something that we ourselves have neither planned nor prepared for nor willfully brought about. ‘It’ calls, against our
expectations and even against our will” (254/276). Notwithstanding the fact that the caller has already been identified as Dasein itself, this begs the question of what prompts the call (or Dasein) to call when it does. Heidegger makes it clear that the call of conscience is an uncontrollable event that happens to Dasein, like a “jolt . . . an abrupt arousal” (251/271). He thereby imbues the call with some mysterious metaphysical force. Describing the call in this manner – as apparently causally unmotivated – contributes to the intangibility of the overall account of authenticity.

To summarize, then, the call of conscience contacts (‘finds’) Dasein’s lost self, turns it reflexively toward that self, and silently bids it to confront its possibility of authenticity. The call of conscience comes from Dasein itself, and speaks in silence. Given that the call of conscience is unprecedented, unpredictable, and unfamiliar, the attestation of the call must remain irreducibly individual: it seems impossible to provide any generic account of the phenomenon.

X. “Making Up For Not Choosing”

Despite its apparent disconnection from material reality, the call of conscience is not supposed to be viewed as a schizophrenic episode. Authentic being-in-the-world is supposed to manifest itself in Dasein taking care of things and interacting with other beings, rather than just in Dasein’s imagination. Heidegger affirms that “[t]o hear the call authentically means to bring oneself to factual action,” which refers to such activities (271/294). So although no particular actions are dubbed “authentic” or “inauthentic” in themselves, Heidegger still connects authenticity to how Dasein chooses among, and acts upon, its possibilities.
Recalling our earlier definition of authenticity as a meta-possibility, we can now ask how authenticity, as a meta-possibility, transforms Dasein’s orientation to its first-order possibilities. Heidegger says that Dasein must reclaim its choices from the they-self, whose influence has distanced it from its ownmost possibilities and thus its potential for authenticity. Reclaiming authenticity entails not embracing specific choices so much as embracing the fact of choosing for oneself. For Heidegger, this means disentangling oneself from the they:

The they has always already taken the apprehension of these possibilities-of-being away from Dasein. The they even conceals the way it has silently disburdened Dasein of the explicit choice of these possibilities. It remains indefinite who is ‘really’ choosing. So Dasein is taken along by the no one, without choice, and thus gets caught up in inauthenticity. This process can be reversed only in such a way that Dasein explicitly brings itself back to itself from its lostness in the they. But this bringing-back must have the kind of being by the neglect of which Dasein has lost itself in inauthenticity. When Dasein thus brings itself back from the they, the they-self is modified in an existentiell manner so that it becomes authentic being-one’s-self. This must be accomplished by making up for not choosing (Nachholen einer Wahl). But making up for not choosing signifies choosing to make this choice – deciding for a potentiality-of-being and making this decision from one’s own self. (248/268)

This key passage tells us more specifically how Dasein’s actions change once it becomes authentic. Dasein can become authentic only by choosing to take hold of its possibilities, which are usually controlled by the they. The precise first-order possibilities in question do
not matter; what counts is the meta-possibility of Dasein’s relationship to its possibilities. The relation is authentic insofar as Dasein, rather than the they-self, chooses for Dasein. This is a promising explanation, but two problems immediately announce themselves.

First, as indicated in the above passage, inauthentic Dasein may well be unaware of how the they overtakes its choices on a regular basis. Since “[t]he they has always already taken the apprehension of these possibility-of-being away from Dasein” and “[t]he they even conceals the way it has silently disburdened Dasein of the explicit choice of these possibilities,” it is not clear how Dasein goes about reclaiming the possibilities that it had relinquished (248/268). Choosing to choose might require Dasein to break away from an arrangement that is invisible to it by definition. The call of conscience alerted Dasein to its fallenness, but it contained no instructions for how to “[make] up for not choosing” (248/268). Furthermore it could be argued that Dasein’s inauthentic habits – such as choosing to give up its possibilities – still constitute a choice, and therefore are not intrinsically different from what is here described as authentic behaviour.

The second problem is more general and more penetrating. Heidegger says, “Dasein is authentically itself only if it projects itself . . . primarily upon its ownmost potentiality-of-being, rather than upon the possibility of the they-self” (243/263-4). This suggests that authentic Dasein must use itself – and not the they-self – as a guide for its actions. But now we have been brought full-circle back to the problem of defining Dasein’s self. Moreover, in the case of making a specific choice between several things, it might be most accurate (not to mention convenient) to understand Dasein’s self merely as its preference. Dasein’s “gut instinct” may tell it what to do even when all the others are doing something different. Hence Dasein achieves both consistency with its own “self” as well as differentiation from others, just as Heidegger suggests. Authenticity – and selfhood in general – might ultimately boil down to something no more philosophically interesting than such gut feelings. But for the time being, this seems like a paltry explanation for how authentic Dasein uses its “ownmost potentiality-of-being” as a guide. For one thing, there is no reason why Dasein would have to hear the call of conscience or face up to its future death in order to contact such visceral preferences. Furthermore, Heidegger nowhere
Heidegger says that the self, which provides the substance behind Dasein’s authentic choices, is also the end-point of these choices: “Understanding the call, Dasein listens to its ownmost possibility of existence. It has chosen itself” (265/287). This sounds circular: if authentic choices issue from Dasein’s own self, as previously indicated, then according to this passage, authenticity is a process of Dasein’s self choosing itself, prior to any definition of the self in question. We require some further description of Dasein’s selfhood as something that can choose and be chosen.

The possibility that has been identified as “ownmost” to each individual Dasein is its death. Perhaps this possibility is the “self,” or the “ownmost possibility of existence,” to which Heidegger refers. Let us consider how such a definition might play out. If the cardinal consideration of Dasein’s existence is death, then this might imply that authentic Dasein looks at every possibility through considerations of mortality: each choice is weighed in the context of Dasein’s finitude. Yet Heidegger has already denied this interpretation of authentic being-toward-death, warning us, in § 53, that resolute anticipation is not the same as “brooding” over death or thinking about it constantly (241/261). Death supposedly influences Dasein’s identity through life, but the prescription for authentic decision-making is not an obsessive engagement with death.

If authenticity is not about seeing death in every situation, then, how does it translate into Dasein’s specific choices? Heidegger has suggested that, whatever the possibilities chosen by authentic Dasein, they are not convergent with the possibilities of the they-self (again, whatever these happen to be). Even without any concrete information about either set of possibilities, we can examine the nature of this opposition. Let us suppose that projecting invokes the language of desire or preference theory to explain the difference between authenticity and inauthenticity. I return to theories of desire fulfillment in Chapter 5.
oneself onto one’s ownmost potentiality-of-being consists in differentiating oneself from the crowd by deliberately seizing possibilities that have not been seized mindlessly already by countless others. Authenticity, then, would be tantamount to non-conformity for the sake of non-conformity. This interpretation is plausible insofar as we tend to connect the concepts of authenticity and originality: authentic people are usually thought to be different from others.\(^\text{44}\) However, although acting differently from the they might be an intuitive component of authenticity, it is a leap to accept it as the core of authenticity. A person who chooses her actions merely in contradistinction to what most or certain others have chosen is best described as rebellious, contrary, or defiant. If she simply refuses to go along with the they on principle, there is no evidence that she makes her choices in accordance with an authentic “self”. She might defy the they-self just for the sake of defiance. We would expect an authentic individual’s choices to converge with the choices of the others at least sometimes, because of authentically shared beliefs, habits, and preferences. The definitive component of an authentic person’s decision-making is presumably something about the process of reflection on who she is, not a facile exercise in compare-and-contrast with others. If it were no more than this, there would be little rationale for using the term “authenticity” as opposed to, say, “originality” or “non-conformity.”

The definition of authenticity as Dasein “choosing itself” therefore looks inadequate even if it is cashed out simply as choosing to be different from one’s peers. But taking the broader definition of “choosing to choose” is not much more helpful. If we suspend the comment about authentic Dasein choosing itself, and just focus on Dasein’s resolve to choose simpliciter, we are faced with further challenges. First, this notion is too general to give any

\[^{44}\text{I return to this in Chapter 6.}\]
indication of what authenticity might look like. It will not do to simply consult the choices Dasein has made, since it is entirely possible that authentic Dasein will choose the same things for itself – the same occupation, the same spouse, the same clothes – that would have been handed down to it inauthentically had it not heard the call of conscience. Second, the definition neglects to explain how one person’s authenticity differentiates her from others, since it is also possible that a number of individuals will make authentic choices that overlap, as if formed by consensus. The object of choice betrays no information about the process by which it was chosen. So if it is true that authentic Dasein, having chosen to choose, is distinct from the they-self, this distinction is unlikely to be evident.

Moreover, without filling in the concept of the “self” that supposedly guides Dasein’s choices, Heidegger offers no insight into the process by which Dasein chooses anything. Speculation suggests that neither a persistent focus on death, nor the strict defiance of others’ choices, nor an unadorned policy of “choosing to choose” yields the results we would expect of an authentic “self.” As many readers have noted, this reticence on Heidegger’s part leads to the unpalatable conclusion that authenticity demands no limitations on Dasein’s behaviour. No particular actions, rationales, or specific motivations are either prescribed or prohibited by this account of authenticity. Anything that Dasein sees fit to do, it seems, is a priori condoned as authentic so long as it follows the call of conscience or some conscious confrontation with death. If this is indeed what Heidegger intends, he has cast the net disappointingly wide.

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45 I am assuming that authenticity can be recognizable somehow, at least to the authentic person, on Heidegger’s account.
46 For some critics, such as Adorno, the dangers of authenticity are not just theoretical: authenticity is linked directly to fascism. This reading of Being and Time is discussed in Chapter 4.
Heidegger would note that the attempt to predict or constrain authentic Dasein’s behaviour is misguided in principle because it requires making the illicit leap from the existential to the existentiell. Nonetheless, it is a natural temptation to ask how authenticity manifests in particular actions or choices. Heidegger’s account leaves the reader with many unanswered questions about Dasein’s experience of authenticity, and its correlate, “resolute anticipation.” On this front, Heidegger pre-empts and tries to diffuse the worry:

Resolution ‘exists’ only as a resolution that projects itself understandingly. But to what does Dasein resolve itself in resoluteness? On what is it to resolve? Only the resolution itself can answer this. It would be a complete misunderstanding of the phenomenon of resoluteness if one were to believe that it is simply a matter of receptively taking up possibilities presented and suggested. Resolution is precisely the disclosive projection and determination of the actual factical possibility. (275/298)

Heidegger refuses to spell out what authenticity means in material or individual terms. His account emphasizes that every aspect of authenticity, from hearing the call of conscience to choosing factical action, remains to be filled in by ontic and existentiell details. We are therefore left with a skeletal picture of authenticity that turns on personal experience and the designation of an as-yet unidentified entity known as the “self.”

XI. The Circle of Authenticity and Fundamental Ontology

All of this is to say that after carefully considering each step in Heidegger’s account of authenticity, we are left without a clear understanding of what authenticity is, how it manifests in Dasein’s life, or how Dasein knows when it is being authentic. Heidegger has
set the reader on a journey without a road map and only vague descriptions of landmarks she might encounter along the way. Readers who are profoundly concerned with the meaning of their own existence and the pursuit of more authentic living will be disappointed.

This conclusion may be unsettling, but it is consistent with Heidegger’s stated methodology and even with warnings he issues at the beginning of Being and Time. Being is always the being of a being, so ontological generalizations about Dasein are inherently limited in their ability to shed light on this or that being. Recall Heidegger’s comment that

[o]nly when the philosophical research and inquiry themselves are grasped in an existentiell way – as a possibility of being of each existing Dasein – does it become possible at all to disclose the existentiellity of existence and therewith to get hold of a sufficiently grounded set of ontological problems. (11/13-14)

Far from being a definitive lesson on the being of each individual instance of Dasein, Heidegger suggests that Being and Time is an exhortation for the reader to grasp his or her own “existentiellity of existence” in terms of the general structure of Dasein laid out in the text. He has attempted to help clear the way for beings – specifically in the case of fundamental ontology, Dasein – to show themselves in their being, but the actual “discoveredness” (Entdecktheit) of beings requires the presence of a phenomenologist in the moment that they disclose themselves. Zimmerman notes that reader participation is required by the structure of Heidegger’s investigation: “while the content of Being and Time is apparently devoted to theoretical issues, the very form of the book requires the reader to undergo dramatic change if he is to understand that content adequately. Heidegger’s existential analysis makes an existentiell demand on its readers” (2). This expectation is
probably why Heidegger stresses from the outset that “[o]ntology is possible only as phenomenology” (31/35).

Guignon goes further, arguing that authenticity itself is prior to a full understanding of phenomenological ontology. He argues that “the only way to fully grasp the account of human existence presented in Being and Time is to actually become authentic. Phenomenology is possible only for authentic individuals” (Guignon, Becoming a Self 129). Not only can Heidegger’s account of authenticity only be completed through personal phenomenology, but also, Guignon suggests, an authentic orientation is pre-requisite to launching the phenomenological inquiry in the first place. The hermeneutic circle is thus reborn: Heidegger supplies the existential, the reader supplies the existentiell, and the two amplify and illuminate one another in a spiral that leads toward the truth of being. Contrary to some of Heidegger’s claims in the text, the overall message might be that authenticity is what enables ontology to do its work.

Taking our cue from Guignon, there is good reason to define Heidegger’s notion of authenticity just as doing fundamental ontology. Ontology seeks the truth of being but recognizes that mere ‘appearances’ will not reveal the meaning it craves. Only authenticity reveals the truth of being-in-the-world by forcing a confrontation with Dasein’s real, unmasked existence: specifically, its thrownness, its finitude, and its intrinsic concern for its own being. Authenticity is the process of Dasein disclosing its being to itself phenomenologically, just as fundamental ontology requires. We might, therefore, interpret authenticity not merely as an aspect of ontology or as one arbitrary possibility of Dasein, but as the key to ontology and the meaning of Dasein in general. Becoming authentic, Dasein not only learns about its own existence but in turn grasps something of the meaning of being
in general, and thus fulfills the mandate of ontological inquiry. Perhaps Heidegger chose
fundamental ontology as the first step in his project because it is the only type of ontology in
which the being that discloses itself and the being that discovers it are one and the same.
Other types of ontology might never be so consummately achieved.

This reappearance of the hermeneutic circle confirms the impossibility of
extrapolating concrete information about authenticity from Heidegger’s account, and
suggests that we should understand Heideggerian authenticity intertextually, as a reflection
of the project in which it appears. Authenticity, or Dasein’s search for its “self,” is parallel to
phenomenological ontology, or the philosopher’s search for the meaning of being. By
defining Dasein as the being that is concerned with its own existence, Heidegger has already
effectively labeled Dasein an existentialist philosopher. When he claims that authentic
Dasein must “be itself,” he is indicating that the study of one’s own existence is tantamount
to authenticity.

Skeptics will ask how, if fundamental ontology is so dependent on personal discovery
and authenticity is subject to personal verification, Heidegger was able to write an entire
volume about the being of Dasein and the existential realities that are common to all beings
of this kind. This is a legitimate question. Beyond pointing out what everyone already
knows about human beings – namely that they are social, that they are born, and that they die
– Heidegger makes numerous claims about Dasein’s experience in the world, as well as its
internal functions (for instance, the call of conscience), that are certainly open to debate.
Ordinarily a philosopher could not be criticized for postulating metaphysical entities that
others might regard as fictitious, but in this case, Heidegger has opened himself to criticism
since he simultaneously holds that the attestation of Dasein’s existence is to be found in
Dasein itself, and pontificates in general terms on said existence. To put it another way, Heidegger illustrates the inevitable relationship between the search for the truth of being and the being that one already is, and at the same time attempts to remove himself from this equation by writing about the meaning of being from a bird’s-eye perspective, with no acknowledgment of the contribution or limitations of his own being in this endeavour.

Guignon’s charitable interpretation of the meaning of authenticity in Heidegger’s overall project helps to resolve certain tensions in the text, but leaves open this problem of expertise and authorship.

Nonetheless I think there is a more trenchant criticism to be made here, one that meets Heidegger on his own terms and raises a problem that is internal to the account. Heidegger insists repeatedly that authenticity is not “better” than inauthenticity. Some readers find this implausible since the language of his text, much like non-philosophical usage, appears to endorse authenticity as more valuable and desirable than its counterpart. He can continue to deny this as long as authenticity is no more than a way of being of Dasein (however “good” this way of being seems to be). But on the interpretation we have just considered, whereby authenticity is the key to fundamental ontology, Heidegger’s denial is on shakier ground. He would seem to be holding both that authenticity is one of several value-neutral possibilities for Dasein, and that it allows Dasein (and consequently, humanity) to discover the meaning of being – a task that he has already identified as urgent. One strains to understand how Heidegger can see authenticity in both of these ways at once.
XII. Heidegger’s Limits

I argued in the first chapter that in order for an understanding of authenticity to be constructive, certain formal requirements should be met. It should be clear how authenticity is different from inauthenticity, as well as related concepts, and how one knows when one is being authentic. Whatever Heidegger’s definition of authenticity achieves, it falls very far from this a priori threshold. Even after his extensive treatment of the topic, we lack any specifics about how Dasein’s authenticity manifests. The difference between authenticity and inauthenticity reduces largely to the distinction between the they and Dasein’s “I myself.” This dichotomy poses problems for the notion of Mitsein, for the “who” of Dasein, and for how Dasein makes authentic choices. Heidegger connects authenticity to Dasein’s “ownmost possibility,” its death, but does not explain how death guides Dasein or individualizes it among other human beings. Dasein is supposedly summoned to authenticity by the call of conscience, an event that is shrouded in pseudo-religious significance and mystique. It is called by its own self, even though it has “fallen away” from itself, and it is turned back onto itself. The self thereby takes on triple duty, and we are left uncertain who Dasein really is and what authenticity means, phenomenologically, for its being.

The mismatch between what we might expect of authenticity and what is delivered in Being and Time should not come as a great surprise. Heidegger’s concept of the self is existentialist, whereas authenticity intrinsically refers to something essentialist. One can philosophize about human being as finite openness and call upon Dasein to confront its pure existence – but this is not what is logically understood as authenticity. Even the more precise definition of “choosing to choose” leaves many predictable questions unanswered (for instance, by what method does Dasein choose and why should this be described as
‘authentic’?). Compounding this misleading use of terminology is the fact that Heidegger cryptically evokes the essentialist, everyday language of selfhood at the same time as he employs this existentialist jargon. Hence Dasein can be “lost” and “found” even though it is intangible, dynamic, and always in the world. One might easily be duped into assuming that Heidegger shares many conventional Western assumptions about the ability to “be oneself,” when in fact he is talking about something quite different.

In the end Heidegger’s existentialist commitments preclude the evidence that is demanded by his subject matter: existentiell information. As long as Dasein is a way of existing, and not a particular existent being, it seems preemptive to ascribe to it any self-reflexive characteristics – authenticity or otherwise. A reader of Being and Time might well interpret the fundamental analytic of Dasein through personal experience and map existentiell details onto the existential template. But there will be no way to compare her judgment of whether she is authentic (among other things) with Heidegger’s intended meaning. Authenticity as mere personal phenomenology is not much better than self-declared revelation, and a philosophical account that reduces to this has offered little insight in the currency of intersubjective thought. However authenticity manifests, it is only ascertainable against the backdrop of an identifiable “self” or some other truth by virtue of which it derives its meaning. Authenticity is not a stand-alone property; it arises out of a correspondence to at least one known being. In Being and Time, Heidegger does not provide a complete or plausible account of that relationship.
CHAPTER 3
SARTRE’S CONCEPTION OF AUTHENTICITY

From an analysis of Heidegger’s conception of authenticity in *Being and Time* it is natural to proceed to an investigation of the work of Jean-Paul Sartre.\(^1\) An analysis of Sartre’s contributions to the philosophy of authenticity is fruitful both independently and as a contrast to our account of Heidegger’s project. However, it should be immediately remarked that Sartre neither explicitly undertakes a response to Heidegger’s work nor sets out to offer his own account of authenticity as such. Moreover, unlike in the case of Heidegger, Sartre’s philosophy of authenticity and related themes is dispersed over several works, spanning different periods in his life and thought. Attributions of philosophical intent are therefore by definition more tenuous when we examine these scattered fragments than when we read a single work such as *Being and Time*.

While Sartre’s phenomenological-ontological work is clearly inspired by Heidegger, as well as their shared mentor, Husserl, it is perhaps most instructive to introduce the parts of Sartre’s thought with which we are concerned by way of Hegel.\(^2\) Just as the latter’s notion of determinate negation posits the existence of everything that A is not as soon as it posits A, the being of human beings for Sartre includes everything that it is not in addition to everything that it is. The dyadic relationship between being and non-being courses through all of Sartre’s thought on existence and identity. In his estimation, being cannot be grasped without simultaneously acknowledging nothingness, which is like the backdrop against

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\(^1\) I will also briefly discuss Sartre’s lifelong partner and philosophical colleague, Simone de Beauvoir.

\(^2\) I do not mean to imply with this move that Sartre is a Hegelian philosopher; Hegel reconciles apparent opposites through *Aufhebung* and endorses a monist view of metaphysics, history, and social relations, all of which is antithetical to Sartre’s position.
which being is. Hence whereas for Heidegger, temporality (specifically finitude) proved to be the ‘horizon’ of being, for Sartre, nothingness is the constant companion of being. The particular nature of human being especially depends upon the relationship between being and nothingness.

Sartre divides being into two types: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The latter is both unique to, and characteristic of all, human beings. As such, it would appear to be co-extensive with Heidegger’s Dasein. However, Sartre eschews the language of Dasein and substitutes for it the notion of consciousness, which likewise refers to undifferentiated human being. Cohen explains: “The Sartrean self is not a concrete self-in-the-world but rather the reflective consciousness of that self-in-the-world as a meaning projected by its own reflective consciousness” (xvii). Although the term ‘consciousness’ implies a privileging of the mental over the physical, human being critically encompasses both aspects of our reality for Sartre. Our physical characteristics, however, like our environment, are not privy to the radical freedom that he will attribute to consciousness: they are part of our facticity, or the factors affecting our being that are beyond our control. Being-in-itself is the type of being that contains nothing but facticity. These non-human (even non-living) beings lack consciousness; they do not make choices; they are what Sartre calls “pure being” or “massif” (solid). Although they exist in time, their being is not temporal, since they do not have possibilities for future existence that must be navigated through free choice.

Being-for-itself is a combination of the being of being-in-itself and what Sartre calls “nothingness,” such that it can be said of human beings that our being involves simultaneously being and not-being. We can “be” (in the sense of being-in-itself) to the extent that our lives are determined by facticity – conditions such as our age, our physical
limitations, the family into which we were thrown – but our being is equally (if not overwhelmingly) characterized by not-being, that is, the lack of all determination. By self-surpassing or transcending ourselves, we convert future openness into past facticity. It is the nothingness in our being that not only enables, but requires, this conversion, keeping us always at a distance from ourselves. We coincide with ourselves (that is, achieve complete being) only at the moment of death, when no future awaits us. So long as we live, the process of transcendence occurs constantly and inescapably, for we must forge our own route into the future from moment to moment whether or not we embrace the freedom which is the vehicle of that movement. That embracement is integral to what Sartre will call “authenticity.”

Sartre’s belief in the interplay of transcendence and facticity in human being results in apparent paradoxes. When Sartre asserts that consciousness “is what it is not and is not what it is,” he is playing on the meaning of the word “is,” which has been left purposely ambiguous in his ontology. Being-for-itself is what it is not in the sense that its composite being includes the nothingness (“what it is not”) that differentiates it from its factical being (“what it is”). My being includes all the things that I am not but could be, since it contains the freedom to define myself. Hence I am lack, or nothingness (“what it is not”) – I am what I am not. Likewise I am not what I am (factically) because to fully coincide with my factical self would reduce me to being-in-itself. So while I am a philosophy student (factically), I am also a being that is not any of the contingent things that it is, because philosophy students do not come in the form of unfree, pure being. Sartre explains this by imagining that he is a waiter: “there is no doubt that I am in a sense a café waiter – otherwise could I not just as well call myself a diplomat or a reporter? But if I am one, this can not be in the mode of
being in-itself. I am a waiter in the mode of being what I am not” (Being and Nothingness 103). The equivocation in the meaning of “what I am” gives the for-itself this seemingly contradictory constitution. As we shall see, this results in difficulties in Sartre’s thought since it effectively takes the force out of any identity labels or personal attributes.

I. The Role of Authenticity in Sartre

It follows from Sartre’s understanding of being-for-itself that the identity of a human being is disjointed, and that, rather than revealing a static fact about ourselves, the search for authenticity will point us to a dynamic interplay between facticity and transcendence, being and non-being. Heidegger’s account of human being, as we saw in the previous chapter, is likewise unstable and insubstantial, although his discussion of the concept frequently suggests otherwise. In Sartre’s work, from the beginning there is no illusion of providing a satisfying, simple answer to the question, “Who am I?” much less, “How ought I to live?” Being-for-itself can never have a unified identity; we are never fully coincident with ourselves. Our existence is absurd, hence in no way subject to rules or justifications. Unlike Heidegger, Sartre identifies as an existentialist: he trumpets and whole-heartedly embraces the nothingness at the core of human identity; he loudly avers the absence of normative values; he insists on humans’ potential for self-creation even when their identity appears to be fixed. In other words, he seems to reject the metaphysics of identity from the outset.

Why, then, does the concept of authenticity even arise in Sartre’s work, considering the previously essentialist applications of the term? One might note that the term

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1 In fact, the moniker is his own invention. Heidegger, meanwhile, took pains in his “Letter on Humanism” to distance himself from this label.
‘authenticity’ as such appears very rarely in Sartre’s publications. We might assert that authenticity is not in fact one of Sartre’s real concerns, and perhaps not even deserving of much attention in a historical review of authenticity. I believe it is, however, for several reasons. It is true that Sartre does not proclaim himself to be dealing with authenticity – at least, not in any systematic way – and that the term arises less frequently in his work than in Heidegger’s. But to read this paucity of references at face value is to miss the significance of many things that do appear throughout his work and contribute to a novel understanding of authenticity, such as his lengthy analysis of bad faith. Furthermore, Sartre signals in his private writings that he was profoundly influenced by Heidegger’s discussion of authenticity in Being and Time. While he was a soldier in the Second World War (1939-40), he wrote: “[Heidegger’s] influence has in recent times struck me as providential, since it supervened to teach me authenticity and historicity just at the very moment when war was about to make these notions indispensable to me” (Diaries 182). Sartre’s post-war writings contain fewer mentions of authenticity, but they carry through in spirit the notion that had seemed so important to him as he formulated his own phenomenological ontology.

Despite Sartre’s proud denial of essentialism, his account of authenticity is a further instance – and a more salient one – of the apparent tension between existentialism and

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2 One of the only mentions of it in Being and Nothingness exists only to signal that the concept is not (yet) at issue: “If it is indifferent whether one is in good or in bad faith, . . . that does not mean that we can not radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here” (Being and Nothingness fn 116; emphasis added).

3 Musings on authenticity appear in the Notebooks for an Ethics and The War Diaries, and he expounds on it at some length in Anti-Semite; further, the term appears in the index of most of his publications, and it could be said that most or all of his literary works address the theme to some extent. However, there is no chapter or section of a work that is entitled “Authenticity” or self-consciously devoted to providing an account of it. In terms of sheer quantity of words devoted to the subject, it appears to be a very minor concept in Sartre’s oeuvre.

4 Sure enough, throughout The War Diaries Sartre chronicles his own search for authenticity and his despair at its failure. Reflecting on his upcoming ten days’ leave, he writes: “I want to live them as authentic” (191). Later he confesses: “I haven’t felt Nausea, I’m not authentic, I have halted on the threshold of the promised lands” (Diaries 62).
authenticity that we already identified in Heidegger. Given that Sartre is forthcoming about his suspicion regarding “identity” in the normal sense of the word, one would not expect to find him theorizing about authenticity, with its connotations of self-sameness and the overlap between the real and the true. This near-duplicity renders his actual treatment of the subject all the more rich and interesting. Can authenticity and existentialism be reconciled? Is a substantial description of authentic existence possible in abstract ontological terms? Is there any normative imperative to be authentic? These are all urgent questions that one could bring to a reading of Sartre’s work.

Much like Heidegger, Sartre delineates what he considers to be the opposite or absence of authenticity before explaining what authenticity is. The terminology is different, though; Sartre almost never uses the term “inauthenticity.” In order to understand the framework in which Sartre discusses authenticity, we need to examine his notions of “bad faith,” as well as the related concepts, “good faith” and “sincerity.”

Bad faith is the common error of clinging to one part of one’s make-up – usually the facticity part – at the expense of the other (usually the transcendence part), and, moreover, trying to convince oneself or others that this part really constitutes the whole. Whereas for Heidegger, wholeness was something to be aspired to (as in “Dasein’s potentiality-for-being-a-whole” – note the complexity of this type of wholeness), the simplistic wholeness aspired to in bad faith is a sign of existential error. Humanity is by definition severed, disjointed,

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5 One might even suggest that Sartre’s attempt to theorize authenticity is in bad faith: he knows that he does not believe, even as he convinces himself that he believes in authentic existence.

6 Wholeness, or reconciliation, is not mistaken as such. The correct attitude toward the being of the for-itself, according to Sartre, is a synthesis of facticity and transcendence, an appreciation of their mutual importance. As he says: “These two aspects of human reality [facticity and transcendence] are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity” (Being and Nothingness 98). Wholeness must not be conflated with monism.
impossible to pin down; human being never catches up to itself. The individual who believes himself to have achieved an “identity” – be it a waiter, a coward, or anything else – is willfully mistaken about the structure of his existence. Hence we may say that the normal semantics of authenticity are reversed for Sartre: the search for a true identity is now inauthentic, because it signals a naïve belief in the possibility of being-a-whole, or of having the simple being of being-in-itself. Authenticity, meanwhile, stems from a recognition of the actual nature of the for-itself, and accordingly an abandonment of the futile search for a single self or an ascribable identity. Indeed, it would be erroneous to speak of “being oneself” in Sartre’s terms. There is no “self” to be as such; there is only “being-human.”

Likewise Sartre eschews the concept of “human nature” – which implies that there are enduring characteristics of humanity – and instead speaks of the “human situation,” which refers to our radical freedom within the factical constraints of thrownness and death.

If this schema is counterintuitive, at least it is strategic: Sartre avoids the trap to which Heidegger succumbed of defining ways of being in terms of “selfhood” – whether that of the They or of Dasein. It is clear that his existentialist agenda has no metaphysical space for such notions, and hence that authenticity must be defined in non-traditional ways, if at all. I shall argue that while Sartre’s account of authenticity is rich and in many ways compelling, its peculiar commitments rule out the possibility of doing justice to our intuitions about authenticity and personal identity. There remains, at the end of the analysis, no conclusion about who one is – one of the foremost desiderata of an account of authenticity.
II. Bad Faith as Inauthenticity

One need not be steeped in phenomenological ontology to recognize the common experience that Sartre labels “bad faith.” On the surface, it is all too familiar: we try to pigeon-hole ourselves into convenient labels or categories in an effort to flee some of our responsibility for choosing a course of action, or to better meet others’ expectations, or to pretend that we have achieved some desired identity, or some combination of these reasons. So understood, bad faith is highly reminiscent of Heidegger’s inauthenticity. Although the ‘They’ do not appear in Sartre’s analysis, it is clear that the lure of bad faith is secured in large part by the judgments of anonymous others, who are so fond of simplistic categories and conformity. To the extent that such expectations are internalized, we may impose the same constraints on ourselves.

On the ontological level, however, bad faith is a variegated phenomenon that appeals to different psychic agents while denying any possible division between them. Although Sartre and his commentators frequently compare bad faith to “lying to oneself,” this is accompanied by an insistence that there can be no separate liar and victim of falsehood (such as, perhaps, the Freudian id and ego) within the “total translucency of consciousness.” This latter phrase captures Sartre’s view that for each individual, all of her beliefs and feelings converge in the same psychological pool; there is nothing “unconscious.” Hence Sartre explicitly denies the psychoanalytic compartments that might explain the presence of inconsistent beliefs within the same psyche, remarking: “it is no longer possible to resort to the unconscious to explain bad faith; it is there in full consciousness, with all its contradictions” (Being and Nothingness 93).

7 “We shall willingly grant that bad faith is a lie to oneself, on condition that we distinguish the lie to oneself from lying in general” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 87).
How then, is it possible for a single consciousness to harbour manifest contradictions? How is it possible for the for-itself to “lie to itself”? The short answer is that it actually cannot. Bad faith is not exactly a “lie” because being-for-itself never fully believes what it believes. Half-heartedness is built into the definition of faith, according to Sartre.

“Faith” and “belief” – which are synonyms in this context – are both characterized by a particular orientation toward evidence for a claim. Significantly, belief is distinct from “knowledge,” although informal language frequently conflates the two. To say that “I believe x” is not equivalent, in Sartrean terminology, to claiming that “I know x,” or even, “to the best of my knowledge, x is true.” Belief is always an act of will. I have some evidence for x, but by an act of faith I choose to believe it even though I am aware of the incompleteness of my evidence (and in some cases I am even aware of direct counterevidence). Both “faith” and “belief,” therefore, are a kind of lax attitude toward evidence: they choose to be satisfied with inadequacy. They are acts of throwing one’s conviction behind a claim that is known to be weak. Bad faith “stands forth in the firm resolution . . . to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decisions to adhere to uncertain truths” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 113).

Because of this, bad faith – much like authenticity and inauthenticity in Heidegger – is already a second-order phenomenon. The belief is a meta-belief, a belief about the nature of belief. Regardless of the particular first-order belief in question (e.g. “I am a waiter”) or the evidence for or against it, bad faith decides to accept as persuasive what it knows to be

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8 Although I am currently discussing these terms with respect to bad faith, the same applies as well to good faith, as I will later show.
Hence Sartre notes that “the project of bad faith must be itself in bad faith” (Being and Nothingness 112) since it “does not hold the norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of good faith. What it decides first, in fact, is the nature of truth” (Being and Nothingness 113).

We shall come to the question of good faith presently, but we may note for the moment that truth has reappeared as the bar against which determinations of authenticity or inauthenticity are made. By veering from the accepted norms of truth, bad faith as a second-order phenomenon ascribes to its first-order beliefs an undeserved degree of veracity. The inauthentic is falsehood masquerading as truth. Yet, as Sartre explains, a person in bad faith can never fully be taken in by this disguised falsehood, because “[t]o believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is no longer to believe” (Being and Nothingness 69). Bad faith fails because consciousness knows the truth that it seeks to deny.

In Being in Nothingness Sartre uses an array of examples in order to concretize the psychological processes in question, but he does not seek to compare or unite them, except to identify them all as instances of bad faith. The diversity of his examples is striking. We shall examine his four principal examples in sequence as a means of analyzing their shared characteristics of bad faith. They are the waiter, the coquette, the homosexual, and the coward.

The first is the example of the overzealous waiter. This individual, on Sartre’s observation, throws himself into his job, over-accentuating the characteristics he most associates with being a waiter, precisely in order to flee the nothingness that separates him

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9 The reverse formulation is also possible: in bad faith being-for-itself refuses to accept as persuasive what it knows to be true, namely, that it is thrown freedom. Hence Sartre says elsewhere: “Bad faith apprehends evidence but it is resigned in advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into good faith” (Being and Nothingness 113). Bad faith may accept unpersuasive evidence or reject persuasive evidence; they are mirror images of the same error.
from his profession – that is, to flee his freedom to not be a waiter, which is his very not-being-a-waiter in the same moment that he goes to work at the café. As Sartre says, “he is playing at being a waiter in a café. . . . the waiter . . . plays with his condition in order to realize it” (Being and Nothingness 102). Hence there is something obviously feigned, or forced, about his being in this situation. The artifice is a deliberate attempt to mask an unsettling truth: the waiter’s ability to transcend his situation. Assuming the hypothetical role of a waiter, Sartre narrates in the first-person:

What I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself of the café waiter, as if it were not just in my power to confer their value and their urgency upon my duties and the rights of my position, as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o’clock or to remain in bed, even though it meant getting fired. (Being and Nothingness 103)

The ontological error in the waiter’s attitude, then, is clearly the denial of his freedom to be or not be a waiter. By attempting to transform his daily routine into a forgone identity, he reaches for that impossible “wholeness” that Sartre has described as the naïve mark of inauthenticity.

The second example is that of the woman on a date, a “coquette” as Sartre calls her, who allows the man to make advances on her while she vacillates on her interest in him. In contrast to the waiter, the woman does not throw herself into a role so much as she avoids acting in any definitive way. He says:

she does not quite know what she wants. She is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the desire cruel and naked would humiliate and horrify her. Yet she would find no charm in a respect which would be only respect. In order to satisfy her, there must be a feeling which is addressed wholly to her personality – i.e., to her
full freedom – and which would be a recognition of her freedom. (Being and Nothingness 97)

The woman is thus torn between the attraction of being desired as an object – “the desire which she inspires” – and an underlying aspiration to be engaged as a whole person. Here the two facets of being-for-itself – facticity and transcendence – are surreptitiously reduced to the familiar opposition between body, on the one hand, and the mind or soul on the other. Rather than repudiate the man’s advances or encourage them overtly, the woman separates herself from her body and takes refuge in the other aspect of her being. Catalano explains: “She is more than what is happening to her; she is not her body. She can interpret what is happening as not happening to her but to her body, and believe that her real self is engaging in an intellectual conversation” (83). This is an error because the woman invariably controls her body even while she nurtures other aspects of her being. She shuts out her awareness of the physical interaction between her and her companion, pursuing lofty intellectual discussion in order to take refuge in her freedom, which is here represented by the mind.10

Her bad faith extends further to the man’s being, which she is also afraid to confront. She interprets the man’s comments at face value: when he calls her attractive, she accepts the compliment literally without acknowledging to herself the sexual innuendo he intends (because this would force a choice). 11 Having chosen to extricate herself from the actual situation, she is able to retreat to her mind and vacate her body. Thus it is without taking responsibility for her actions that the woman allows her companion to capture her hand under

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10 Sartre says that “the young woman leaves her hand there, but she does not notice that she is leaving it” (Being and Nothingness 97). Is it even possible, given the total translucency of consciousness, for her to be unaware of this action? Does she not require something resembling the previously maligned Freudian “unconscious” in order to effect this internal inconsistency?

11 Catalano comments: “The woman is in bad faith because she knows her companion’s action for what it truly is as well as she knows her own desire for that action. But she continues to perform in such a way as to avoid that which she knows” (82).
the table, and leaves it there, lifeless. Sartre explains that “during this time the divorce of the body from the soul is accomplished; the hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion – neither consenting nor resisting – a thing” (Being and Nothingness 97). In this excerpt, “soul” is another synonym for the woman’s freedom as being-for-itself – which, if it were authentic, would not abdicate responsibility for the behaviour of its hand. She denies what she knows the man is attempting to do because she does not want to make up her mind about her own desires.

The third is example centers around the homosexual man who, Sartre claims, feels “guilty” about his sexual orientation presumably because of the negative attitude toward homosexuality in 1940s Paris (Being and Nothingness 107). In bad faith this individual tries to brush off the label that would appear to accrue to him, constituting himself instead as perhaps a heterosexual man who has had the odd homosexual encounter. To do so he takes refuge in his “obscure but strong feeling that a homosexual is not a homosexual as this table is a table or as this red-haired man is red-haired” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 107). That is to say, he overemphasizes the nothingness that separates him from his actions and his facticity in order to effect a relation of sheer non-identity between himself and these facts. He would rather constitute himself as pure freedom than a freedom that is still founded in certain identity relationships. Hence Sartre says: “He lays claim to ‘not being a paederast’ in the sense in which this table is not an inkwell. He is in bad faith” (Being and Nothingness 108).

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12 Even in gay-positive twenty-first century society, this man’s attitude would count as an instance of bad faith. However, his motivation for this “inauthentic” behaviour should be understood contextually. Sartre indeed refers to him as a “paederast” and calls his homosexual encounters “mistakes.” Absent these judgments the man might be less likely to employ bad faith as a refuge.
Interestingly, the homosexual example also includes a second character, whose own version of bad faith provides a handy comparison to that of the homosexual’s. The homosexual has a friend who is annoyed by his friend’s duplicity. He knows full well that his friend has a history of sexual encounters with men and is bothered by the bad faith that allows him to refuse to take ownership of this past. In effect the friend approaches the homosexual and says: “Admit it: you’re gay.” He desires a confession of identity, a belief in the complete convergence between being-for-itself and some aspect of its facticity. His view implies that his friend was not only a homosexual in the past, but is fundamentally and will always remain a homosexual. Sartre calls this “sincerity.”

The friend represents the flip-side of the bad faith coin. Just as the homosexual is in error when he attempts to dissociate himself from the undeniable facticity of his past, the friend is mistaken when he attempts to fully unite the homosexual’s being with his past actions. The former overstates the power of freedom, while the latter amputates it altogether. Sincerity is thus a form of bad faith; we shall examine this relationship shortly.

The final example of bad faith is that of the coward – or rather, the man who calls himself a coward. For here lies the rub: the man is in bad faith when he believes that he “is” a coward, but this is not to say that the man fails to meet conventional definitions of cowardice. Indeed, even if our man has behaved in a fashion that anyone familiar with the term would identify as “cowardly,” it is still incorrect to label him “a coward.” He is courageous at the same time as he is cowardly, in the mode of not-being-courageous. That is, even while he is behaving as a coward, he has the freedom to be courageous, and in this (admittedly obscure) sense he is courageous, too. This, indeed, explains the coward’s

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13 For this reason, we probably should not refer to this as “the homosexual example” at all. We should, rather, refer to “the man who has had homosexual encounters.” To call him “a homosexual” would be to commit the friend’s error.
disposition to call himself an unflattering name: it is easier to resign himself to being a coward once and for all than to continually face up to his freedom to be courageous. The label “coward” implies a thorough-going coincidence between the man’s behaviour and his being, which disregards the all-important nothingness that drives a wedge in his identity. Bad faith is only possible because of this peculiar nature of the for-itself, which can never merely be what it is. Sartre explains:

if I were not capable of determining myself as cowardly – that is, to deny courage to myself and thereby to escape my cowardice in the very moment that I posit it – if it were not on principle impossible for me to coincide with my not-being-courageous as well as with my being-courageous – then any project of bad faith would be prohibited me. Thus in order for bad faith to be possible, sincerity itself must be in bad faith. The condition of the possibility for bad faith is that human reality, in its most immediate being . . . must be what it is not and not be what it is. (Being and Nothingness 112)

The coward example cuts to the very problem of identity within Sartre’s philosophy. For if even the undeniably cowardly man cannot constitute himself as a coward, then the term “cowardice” – along with countless other characteristics and labels that contribute to an individual’s identity – appears to become meaningless. But this is paradoxical, since Sartre has already used the meaning of “cowardice” to gauge this man’s bad faith. He is not in bad faith because he has employed a vacuous term to describe himself. He is in bad faith because he is cowardly only in the manner of “a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 100). There must be some sense, therefore, in which “cowardly” is “what he is” – but not in a way that would justify calling him “a coward.” In
other words, Sartre demands that it be possible to understand what a person is even while recognizing that a human being never is what he is. The problem is that Sartre concedes the meaning of “cowardice” and the possibility of being cowardly while denying that even the cowardly person can call himself such. This calls into question our entire use of language and understanding of personality.\(^{14}\)

A partial explanation of this point is furnished by the Sartrean notion of “sincerity,” which distinguishes between a person’s completed actions and her present and future freedom. Sincerity refers to the simple, in-itself coincidence of one being “what one is” (Being and Nothingness 62, 105). As we have seen, this type of being contradicts the inherent structure of being-for-itself and, Sartre confirms, is therefore “doomed to failure” so long as it applies to present or future circumstances (Being and Nothingness 106). However, it is possible to be sincere with respect to one’s unalterable past, since the latter belongs to facticity rather than transcendence. The past has the being of the in-itself; it is what it is.\(^{15}\) If I was born in 1980, it is not in bad faith that I aver this fact: I may be sincere with respect to my “thrownness” since it is concretely verifiable and historically inescapable.\(^{16}\) In fact, one form of bad faith consists in the refusal to sincerely face up to facts about one’s life. This is exemplified by the homosexual. He denies (or attempts to distance himself as far as possible from) that which is undeniable: that he has had sexual encounters with men. Sincerity

\(^{14}\) I am not suggesting that there is never a legitimate mismatch between language and meaning or between labels and identity. A genuine coward might never call himself a coward, since the act of self-admonishment might entail a certain amount of courage, whereas someone who is only slightly cowardly might lament, “I’m such a coward,” which is mostly inaccurate but easier than confronting one’s specific failures. Sartre’s position, however, defines terms such as ‘cowardice’ precisely by denying that they can ever be used accurately. This constitutes a troubling subversion of our linguistic practices and assumptions about personal identity.

\(^{15}\) “The past is an in-itself which was once for-itself” (Sartre, Diaries 313).

\(^{16}\) This is not to say that I am being-in-itself to the extent that I was born. I may still “transcend” my thrownness in the attitude which I adopt toward it. But doing so would still not falsify the statement, “I was born in 1980.”
demands that he acknowledge this. To be sincere means “to be what one is,” where “what one is” is determined according to the Hegelian aphorism, “Wesen ist was gewesen ist”\(^{17}\) (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 62).

Sincerity with respect to the past, however, can easily slip into the “doomed” variety of sincerity, which attempts to define a person as just what he has done, rather than what he is capable of doing. The gay man’s friend commits this type of error: he jumps from the undeniable conclusion that his friend has had gay encounters to the unwarranted conclusion that his friend “is” gay. He seeks sincerity about the present and future, which are by definition immune to this type of pre-determination in virtue of the freedom of the for-itself. It is impossible for man (Sartre’s term) to simply “be what he is.” Sartre calls this type of sincerity “a demand,” not “a state” (Being and Nothingness 100). To identify oneself with a state would be akin to forming an essential identity – a consummation devoutly to be wished on conventional accounts of authenticity, but a primitive form of self-deception on Sartre’s account. Hence the individual who declares, “I am a homosexual,” or “I am a coward” submits, according to Sartre, to the self-annihilating form of sincerity, which instantly collapses into bad faith. Catalano summarizes: “true sincerity is impossible; I can never say without qualification that I am now this kind of person” (85).

The waiter example – which in virtue of its renown has become the paradigm of bad faith – is not listed as an instance of sincerity by Sartre, but we can see that it follows the same structure. Like the coward and the homosexual’s friend, the waiter clings to some aspect of his facticity in order to flee his freedom (indeed, his responsibility) to create himself. While it is true that he has been a waiter in the past, and one could not deny that he is currently employed in a café, he incorrectly projects this contingent fact about his life onto

\(^{17}\) Literally, “being is what has been.”
the future as though it were impossible for him to do otherwise. He does so not by adopting a dogmatic attitude, but by comporting himself in an excessively “waiterly” fashion. The sincerity takes the form of an act, rather than a declaration. He needs to convince others in order to convince himself.

The coward and the homosexual, by contrast, seem to be wrestling with their own self-perception more than they are trying to fool others about who they are. Their bad faith manifests itself in the appropriation of a certain incomplete attitude toward their identities. They apprehend some truths about themselves while doing their best to avoid confronting others. Although this problem may be visible to others through their behaviour, the locus of their inauthenticity is internal. The waiter appears to be acting a role; the coward and the homosexual appear to be talking themselves into (or, as it were, out of) a role.

The coquette is harder to categorize along these lines, because she appears to be refraining from committing to any role, whether internal or external. Her example is marked by indecisiveness and ambiguity. Sartre insinuates that her bodily actions mask her freedom by complacently following the man’s initiative; but what happens in her head is no less inauthentic. She is ostensibly in bad faith both for allowing her body to become a thing and for pretending that her interaction with her companion is occurring on a strictly cerebral level. In a sense, then, she takes refuge in both her facticity and her transcendence simultaneously. The correct orientation toward the situation would involve a “coordination” of these two facets of her being:

These two aspects of human reality [facticity and transcendence] are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them or to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while
preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and 
transcendence as being facticity. *(Being and Nothingness 98)*

In the previous examples, the individual in bad faith is at fault for choosing, or pretending to 
choose, between facticity and transcendence (all but the gay man choose facticity). In the 
coquette example, the woman’s inertia constitutes a lack of choice that is blameworthy 
because she holds her facticity and her transcendence at opposite poles of her being and 
relegates the unpleasantness of her situation to the facticity part. Sartre indicates that she 
ought to accept both of them independently rather than fret over their disjointedness. It is not 
enough to acknowledge the twofold composition of being-for-itself; one must uphold them 
simultaneously.

We can conclude that these diverse examples do not point to a singular phenomenon 
of “bad faith.” In some cases the individual trades her freedom for facticity; in other cases, 
the reverse; and in the final example, the operative feature seems to be paralysis rather than 
trade. Sometimes the individual manifests his bad faith through actions (the waiter); 
sometimes through declaration (the homosexual and the coward); and sometimes, at least in 
principle, only at a psychological level (the coward, possibly, and the coquette). Moreover, 
many if not all of these examples can also properly be described as sincerity, which has 
emerged as one of the most common forms of bad faith. We are clearly dealing with a 
multifarious phenomenon. Yet, since bad faith is being posited as a form, if not the form, of 
inauthenticity, it is important to isolate a common error in these cases if we are to extract 
from them a better understanding of what authenticity avoids.
III. Fleeing Ambiguity: Beauvoir on Bad Faith

Simone de Beauvoir also provides a detailed analysis of bad faith and carefully lists its manifestations in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, published a few years after *Being and Nothingness*. She is more explicit than Sartre about the particular ontological error involved in each instance of bad faith, but her examples ultimately reinforce the view of inauthenticity as Sartre initially articulated it.

The first type of bad faith Beauvoir discusses is that exhibited by the “sub-man,” whom she compares to the bondsman in Hegel’s famous dialectic (46). Choosing to flee his freedom, the sub-man “feels only the facticity of his existence” and therefore “realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of” (Beauvoir 44). Worse than the waiter, the sub-man willingly plays whatever role is offered to him: “In lynchings, in pogroms, in all the great bloody movements organized by the fanaticism of seriousness and passion . . . those who do the actual dirty work are recruited from among the sub-men” (Beauvoir 44). This is bad faith characterized entirely by the abdication of freedom and the willing submission of oneself to the freedom of another; Sartre has no example of this kind of bad faith.

Beauvoir’s second example is the serious man, a person whose bad faith consists in the attempt to replace his freedom, not with the freedom of another individual, but with a cause. Beauvoir explains how this type of bad faith undermines itself:

The thing that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of being able to lose himself in it. So much so, that the movement toward the object is, in fact, through his arbitrary act the most radical assertion of subjectivity: to believe for belief’s sake, to will for will’s
sake is, detaching transcendence from its end, to realize one’s freedom in its empty
and absurd form of freedom of indifference. (47)

The serious man is subtly distinguished from the passionate man, who “sets up the object as
an absolute, not, like the serious man, as a thing detached from himself, but as a thing
disclosed by his subjectivity” (Beauvoir 64). This person refuses to accept the limits on his
own freedom. Common among lovers, “[t]he passionate man seeks possession; he seeks to
attain being” (Beauvoir 64). Naturally his efforts are ultimately frustrated: “having involved
his whole life with an external object which can continually escape him, he tragically feels
his dependence” (Beauvoir 65).

Beauvoir describes several other types of bad faith reactions to the ambiguous nature
of human reality, including the nihilist, who, “conscious of being unable to be anything, . . .
then decides to be nothing” (52) and the adventurer, who exhibits “a freedom which remains
indifferent to its content” (58). Common among all the types of bad faith she identifies is a
strategy for fleeing the unpleasant combination of facticity and transcendence that her
ontology, like Sartre’s, posits as the foundation of human existence. Whereas Sartre’s
examples of bad faith take the form of particular individuals in well-defined situations,
Beauvoir categorizes bad faith in broader, yet cleaner strokes, explicitly revealing the error in
each attitude. Sincerity is a less prominent feature of bad faith in Beauvoir’s examples
because she deals not with personal case histories, which can admit of sincere or insincere
interpretations of one’s past, but with general behaviours and attitudes.

Not only does Beauvoir explain the faulty belief in each case of bad faith she surveys,
but she strengthens the ontological perspective underwriting her analysis by showing how
bad faith necessarily fails in its project. Regardless of the nature of one’s strategy for fleeing
reality, the ambiguous nature of human reality will always re-assert itself. The nihilist’s “will of negation is forever belying itself, for it manifests itself as a presence at the very moment that it displays itself”; the serious man and the sub-man use their freedom in order to attach themselves to causes that would deprive them of their freedom; and the passionate man and the adventurer attempt to harness being without taking account of facticity and the freedom of others (Beauvoir 54). Beauvoir concludes, importantly, two things that were left unsaid in Being and Nothingness. First, she summarizes, “[t]here is no way for a man to escape from this world” (Beauvoir 69). Bad faith is always a futile attempt to flee reality. Second, she claims, “no existence can be validly fulfilled it if is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others” (Beauvoir 67). While the first conclusion helpfully summarizes the error and futility of bad faith, the second makes an important statement about the moral implications of authenticity. Because Beauvoir has demonstrated that each type of bad faith jeopardizes the freedom of others, and that authenticity requires the freedom of others, she is able to conclude without any extraordinary arguments that “every man needs the freedom of other men and, in a sense, always wants it” (71). This locates her account of bad faith and authenticity in firmer humanistic territory than the highly individualistic account presented in Being and Nothingness. I shall return to this point presently.

IV. Bad Faith as Inconsistency

Recalling Sartre’s view that faith can never entirely convince the believer of its object, the examples of people in bad faith all feature some form of half-hearted belief – belief for which there is persuasive counter-evidence that the believer chooses not to consider. When the waiter convinces himself that he is “just” a waiter, the coward “just” a
coward, and so on, they all content themselves with partial truths. The same is true of Beauvoir’s examples. For instance, she notes that “[t]he nihilist is right in thinking that the world possesses no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly” (Beauvoir 57). So there is a kernel of truth in the beliefs of all these individuals – but this does not yet suggest what is unique about bad faith. Do not a great number of people regularly content themselves with weak evidence for something they wish to believe – that good things will come with patience, that God exists and is watching over them – or with partial truths? Are all of these instances of bad faith?

More specifically, then, what makes bad faith different from other mistaken beliefs is its content: bad faith is a mistaken attitude toward the nature of being-for-itself. Regardless of their assorted manifestations, each instance of bad faith described ultimately fails to recognize that consciousness is thrown freedom, that it is what it is not and is not what it is. This type of error is blameworthy only if one assumes, as Sartre does, the total translucency of consciousness, which guarantees that an individual’s denial about her own being is never genuinely naïve. Inauthenticity as bad faith is thus a deliberate rejection of one’s own being. This observation affords us a small preview of what will count as authenticity for Sartre. Much like Heidegger, Sartre is insinuating that authenticity amounts to practicing fundamental ontology: being-for-itself, like Dasein, is authentic insofar as it correctly apprehends and reflects on its own ontological make-up. And, as with Heidegger, this account remains a generic formula, which says nothing particular about apprehending or honouring the self as a special, once-occurring instance of human being.

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18 If it were not for the total translucency of consciousness, these beliefs in partial truths might be cases of pure ignorance rather than bad faith. I leave aside the question of whether the total translucency of consciousness is a justified assumption.
We can also see that the mistaken attitude toward one’s own being is not logically equivalent to a “lie to oneself.”\footnote{Others have made this observation. For instance, Santoni rejects the possibility of “lying to oneself” in Sartrean terminology and calls bad faith instead “a half-persuasion” (45).} As Sartre agrees, the structure of lying requires separate agents that can have divergent beliefs. This is not possible within a single consciousness. Sartre says that “[a] man does not lie about what he is ignorant of; he does not lie when he spreads an error of which he himself is the dupe” (Being and Nothingness 87). The liar’s denial is entirely outwardly directed. The liar denies the truth to others, and denies the denial of the truth to others; the lie is a “behaviour of transcendence” involving a projection onto the world (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 88). The person in bad faith, on the other hand, knows the truth and attempts to deny it to himself; the negation is directed toward consciousness rather than the world. But since one cannot maintain these inconsistent beliefs at the same time, the lie – if that’s how it was intended – collapses. The “lie” can last at most for a fleeting moment before consciousness is alerted to the subterfuge. As we will see, this moment is the residence of good faith.

Nonetheless, Sartre finds lying to be an apt analogy to bad faith because, he claims, both instances have the “structure of falsehood” (Being and Nothingness 89). Falsehood is, of course, what a lie purveys. While it is true that bad faith avoids confronting what it knows to be true, it is still a stretch to assert that this psychological weakness constitutes the dissemination of falsehood. Particularly since Sartre emphasizes that being-for-itself both is what it is not and is not what it is, the content of the bad faith belief is better understood as a partial truth than as a falsehood; after all, is it not ‘true’ that the waiter is a waiter (in the mode of not-being-what-one-is)? Is it not ‘true’ that the coward is cowardly (in the sense of having-been cowardly)? Clinging to facticity at the expense of transcendence, or vice versa,
is short-sighted, to be sure, but it is not logically false: both are valid components of one’s being. As Linda Bell notes, “[n]either of these possibly quite disparate views is reality and the other mere appearance” (41).

We should therefore reject the posited analogy between bad faith and “lying to oneself.” Instead, we should understand bad faith with respect to three other terms. First, it can be understood as hypocrisy: this is when a person behaves inconsistently, or spurns outwardly what she has inwardly accepted. The waiter ostensibly knows that he is free to not be a waiter, but pretends that this is not so. The hypocrisy is in bad faith because what he inwardly accepts and outwardly denies are components of his own being. Not all cases of hypocrisy are bad faith, since one can be hypocritical about non-ontological matters.

Second, bad faith can be due to ambivalence: a person does not know what she wants or believes and therefore abdicates the responsibility of choosing. The coquette seems to fit into this category. Once again, not all instances of ambivalence are necessarily in bad faith. The coquette, because she pretends to be a thing at the same time as she makes use of her freedom, straddles both headings.

Third, the individual in bad faith might be considered akratic: that is, he knows how he wants to act, but fails to see his projects through to their

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20 This is not to say that we should reject the possibility of lying to oneself altogether, or even the possibility that lying to oneself is the crux of inauthenticity. Rather, Sartre’s commitment to the total translucency of consciousness makes lying to oneself impossible on his account, and hence bad faith should not be understood in this way. A Freudian, for instance, who disagreed with Sartre’s critique of the id and the ego, might well maintain that people regularly lie to themselves in the literal sense.

21 A classic example of hypocrisy is the double-standard embraced by the person who denounces smoking when others do it, but excuses the same behaviour in herself. This does not appear to be an instance of bad faith because the individual has not mistakenly apprehended the nature of her own being; she is just hypocritical in her actions. She can do this while still recognizing herself as both transcendence and facticity.

22 This might, additionally, be an instance of hypocrisy. There is no reason to assume that each instance of bad faith is only one or the other.
conclusion. There is a disparity between his understanding of freedom and his experience of freedom. Insofar as Hamlet is in bad faith, he exemplifies this.23

Hypocrisy, ambivalence, and akrasia are all types of inconsistency. This makes sense as an umbrella explanation for what is wrong with bad faith, although not all inconsistency is necessarily bad faith. Authenticity depends on lucidity or wholeness with respect to oneself. The authentic person is not internally divided or in denial about some part of her being. She is, rather, self-assured and clear about what exactly makes her who she is. Those who are hypocritical, indecisive, or akratic are unlikely to earn this distinction.

Sartre’s conception of authenticity likewise points us to a standard of consistency and wholeness – though not in the essentialist way used by the Romantics. For if inconsistency is the antonym of authenticity, we would expect the authentic person to behave regularly, predictably, and always in accordance with her thoughts and beliefs. This definition is radically at odds with Sartrean ontology. Authenticity, for him, is indeed a function of consistency – but this is defined solely in terms of freedom and facticity, rather than particular identity traits. The authentic person constantly reaffirms the twin truths about her being (not just part-truths, as in bad faith) and assumes the burden of freedom that goes along with them. He abjures freedom-confining characteristics – the “precautions to imprison a man in what he is” – and commits to continual self-creation (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 102). As we shall see, this means that authenticity itself is not an enduring state any more

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23 It could certainly be objected that akrasia is an ethical condition, and we are here discussing only epistemological and ontological ones. Hamlet is akratic in the traditional sense because he clearly perceives his ethical duty but he is incapable of carrying it out. Sartre would reject the talk of ethical duties; Hamlet is fundamentally free. But Sartre can also note that Hamlet is in bad faith because he recognizes his freedom and yet acts like a powerless thing, afraid to carry out his own projects; or, in another light, he is in bad faith because he must know he is free, although he behaves as though he had no choice about what to do (he dawdles for four acts, but Claudius’ murder is a foregone conclusion). Either way, the akrasia can be seen to traverse ethical boundaries and enter the realm of Sartrean bad faith.
than sincerity is. Moreover, Sartre’s account recapitulates a problem we discovered in Heidegger’s work, namely that authenticity neglects to say anything about who the authentic person is. While bad faith has proven to be very diverse, all authentic people appear to be authentic in the same way on Sartre’s account.

V. Good Faith

Many readers of Sartre make the mistake of assuming that good faith and bad faith are opposites, or that the former is equivalent to authenticity. This is far from the case. Although Sartre’s account of good faith is vague, and therefore prone to conflicting interpretations by different scholars, good faith is at best an inchoate form of authenticity – and at worst just a childish variation on bad faith. Meanwhile, Sartre calls sincerity “the antithesis of bad faith” but he does not thereby mean that sincerity is the same as authenticity, or even that it is the same as good faith (Being and Nothingness 100). These terms must be carefully contrasted and analyzed.

Sartre says that to be sincere is “to be what one is” (Being and Nothingness 105) while to be in good faith is “to believe what one believes” (Being and Nothingness 115). Both of these phenomena have the structure of striving for an identity relation that is by definition foreign to the for-itself. While the sincere person attempts (in vain) to reduce himself to coincidence with “what he is” – namely, some facet of his facticity – the person in good faith attempts to reduce his belief to pure coincidence with itself. This move depends on a naïveté about the nature of faith.

24 Sartre asks, “can one even talk about ‘preserving’ [authenticity]? The instant that arrives is novel, the situation is novel: a new authenticity has to be invented” (Diaries 219).
25 According to Santoni, Sartre himself “sometimes uses the two expressions synonymously” (xvii).
As we saw earlier, Sartre considers all faith to be flawed, because “belief is a being which questions its own being, which can realize itself only in its destruction, which can manifest itself to itself only by denying itself... To believe is not-to-believe” (Being and Nothingness 114). The difference between good faith and bad faith is supposedly that bad faith knows that it doesn’t really believe, but goes on believing anyway, whereas good faith believes only as long as it genuinely appears to be valid belief.

It should be immediately evident that good faith, so defined, violates Sartre’s stipulation of the total translucency of consciousness. We rejected the definition of bad faith as a lie to oneself precisely because of the impossibility of believing a lie that was purveyed by the same consciousness wherein it was supposed to be accepted. If the lie is the inaccurate or partial truth offered up by consciousness for belief, then the acceptance of this lie is what Sartre means by good faith. But he has already demonstrated that accepting one’s own lie is impossible. The most that can be said is that bad faith briefly passes through good faith on its way to discovering its failed cynicism:

That which affects itself with bad faith must be conscious (of) its bad faith since the being of consciousness is consciousness of being. It appears then that I must be in good faith, at least to the extent that I am conscious of my bad faith. But then this whole psychic system is annihilated. We must agree in fact that if I deliberately and cynically attempt to lie to myself, I fail completely in this undertaking; the lie falls back and collapses beneath my look. (Being and Nothingness 89)

There seems to be no doubt that, even if bad faith and good faith can be pried apart conceptually, the latter devolves inevitably into the former when it is pursued. Good faith cannot be maintained.
Some defenders of the distinction between good and bad faith resort to seizing upon the separate notion of the ideals of good and bad faith, as opposed to the actual practices, to explain the dissimilarity. Santoni agrees that “[g]ood faith, like all faith, initially has an ideal which, if pursued as a project, would lead to bad faith” (83). However, he continues, “good faith does not, as does the project of sincerity, pursue this ideal” (83). Catalano agrees that “the ideal of good faith is in bad faith” but that “the project of good faith carries within it the critical awareness that the ideal of faith is in bad faith” (212). What, then, is the ‘project’ of good faith?

A new example might help illuminate the distinctions we are trying to grasp. Let us imagine that a person wants to believe that he is generous. He has evidence that he has been generous in the past; for instance, he has made great charitable contributions to worthy causes for the last five years. At the same time, since generosity is a character trait that is constantly susceptible to renewal or renunciation, the man is assuredly not-generous at the same time as he is generous. His generosity is analogous to the cowardice of the putative coward, except that here we are dealing with a virtuous or desirable trait. How would the various types of faith manifest in this case?

If the man were sincere, he would attempt to flee his not-being-generous and declare that he was simply generous, equating his identity with his past actions. He would think that he is generous the way that Sartre’s inkwell is an inkwell or this computer is a computer. Naturally, this sincerity would also be in bad faith, because the man would know that his generosity could not be fixed down in such a manner. He would cling to his generous
actions in the past without acknowledging that his generosity was not determined, and that it
would not project itself effortlessly in the future.\textsuperscript{26}

If the man were like the waiter, then he might continually undertake charitable acts in
order to go on constituting himself as “a generous person,” while ignoring the knowledge
that none of these acts makes him who he is. He would perform generosity in order to
achieve the appearance of a thing-like “generous person.” At the same time, he would be
aware of the artifice of his attitude: he would know that he was always separated from these
acts by the freedom to do otherwise. He would still be in bad faith.

What if the man were in good faith? According to Sartre, “[g]ood faith wishes to flee
the ‘not-believing-what-one-believes’ by finding refuge in being” (\textit{Being and Nothingness}
115). By hypothesis, then, this quasi-generous man would flee the fact that he couldn’t quite
believe in his own generosity by simply being generous. His attitude of good faith would
therefore be indistinguishable from the attitude of sincerity to the outsider. Internally,
however, it would supposedly differ in the following sense: he would actually believe the
claim that he is generous without realizing that it was mere belief. He would fail to
recognize that faith in his generosity was bad faith.

In contrast to bad faith, then, we might say that good faith is only a first-order belief.

\textit{Sartre suggests as much by calling it “simple faith” and “immediate” (\textit{Being and Nothingness}
)}
Good faith is akin to the meaning of belief in our everyday usage. When we say “I believe that Pierre is my friend,” we have no second-order ontological machinations in mind; we mean that we simply believe something, without concerning ourselves with the fallibility of belief.

But according to Sartre, even such innocent colloquial claims are susceptible to the total translucency of consciousness, and hence slide into bad faith. He invokes Hegel to show that the immediate (the thetic) instantly undermines itself: “the immediate calls for mediation and . . . belief, by becoming belief for itself, passes to the state of non-belief” *(Being and Nothingness)* 114). Hence I cannot, as a matter of fact, “simply” believe that Pierre is my friend. And the man who fancies himself generous cannot simply believe that he is generous without realizing that it is mere belief. To the extent that it exists, good faith resides in the momentary lapses of the total translucency of consciousness. We may distinguish the “ideal” of good faith and the “project” of good faith in this way: one may have an ideal (goal) of good faith, which entails a desire to believe what one believes as well as the naïve view that belief can be believed, but the project (experience) of believing what one believes collapses into bad faith as soon as it is acknowledged. Good faith hardly appears praiseworthy or attractive on this account. As a project, good faith is futile; and as an ideal, good faith is naïve.

Santoni’s and Catalano’s characterizations of good faith nonetheless tout it as a positive alternative to bad faith. Santoni argues that the ideal of good faith, if pursued, would lead to bad faith, but that “good faith does not . . . pursue this ideal” (83). What, then, does good faith do? He offers no suggestion. Or is good faith simply an inert principle, conceptually different from bad faith but ultimately unachievable as a project? Catalano,
meanwhile, asserts that “the project of good faith carries within it the critical awareness that
the ideal of faith is in bad faith” (212). But awareness – much less critical awareness – is
precisely what we found to be lacking in good faith. What are these interpreters referring to?

Sartre is unfortunately inconsistent in his brief discussions of good faith, and it is not
clear that he had only one phenomenon in mind. In several places he insinuates that good
faith is very different from, and much preferable to, bad faith. For instance, he says that bad
faith rejects the “norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of
good faith” (Being and Nothingness 113). This prompts Santoni to remark that “whereas bad
faith is unwilling to be persuaded by critical evidence, good faith is willing” (71). This
suggestion, however, is not buttressed by the rest of Sartre’s reflections on the nature of good
and bad faith. For if the “critical evidence” offered for a belief is complete and adequate, the
orientation toward it is no longer “belief.” A willingness to be persuaded by inadequate
evidence signals unwarranted credulity on Sartre’s account, which, whatever the intention,
immediately collapses into bad faith. Moreover we saw that bad faith can manifest itself
either as rejecting important evidence (e.g. that one has had homosexual relationships in the
past) or as accepting dubious evidence (e.g. that one “is” cowardly, courageous, etc.). In
both cases some critical evidence is being accepted and some is being rejected – so what
makes these instances of bad faith rather than good faith?

Elsewhere Sartre says that “bad faith apprehends evidence but it is resigned in
advance to not being fulfilled by this evidence, to not being persuaded and transformed into
good faith” (Being and Nothingness 113). Explicit though this statement seems, it is also
inconsistent with the metaphysics of faith he had articulated earlier. If good faith accepts
some evidence that was rejected by bad faith – even if that evidence is persuasive – it will
still realize that it is in “faith” and it will no longer be “persuaded” or “transformed.” All faith depends on imperfect evidence. The good variety of faith here is indistinguishable from the bad. As such, a person in good faith will not be able to “believe what [he] believes,” since “to believe is not-to-believe” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 115). Good faith again appears to be untenable.27

Catalano takes a different approach to good faith than Santoni, but still argues that “the project of good faith carries within it the critical awareness that the ideal of faith is in bad faith” (212). Aside from the difficulty of distinguishing between the “project” of good faith and the actual practice, this conclusion is at odds with Sartre’s own assessment: “to believe [the disposition to put myself in bad faith] sincerely innocent would [be] good faith” (Being and Nothingness 113). In other words, Sartre holds that good faith considers the ideal of bad faith to be innocent – good faith is optimistic about the whole faith enterprise.

Catalano misreads this point. Nonetheless, both Santoni’s and Sartre’s declarations here strain to be reconciled with Sartre’s previous assertions about faith. Assuming the total translucency of consciousness, any kind of faith – good, bad, or otherwise – should recognize itself qua faith, and should recognize that faith is a tactic of self-persuasion. Recall that “[t]o believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is to no longer believe” (Being and Nothingness 69). Catalano might be right, then, that good faith is aware that the

27 When Sartre and his interpreters speak of good faith as accepting critical evidence, or being willing to be “transformed,” they might have in mind a situation where all the evidence available points to a certain belief and appears to be complete. For instance, if all the evidence available suggests that Pierre is my friend, and I have no reason to believe otherwise, then perhaps I can believe that Pierre is my friend in good faith. If evidence to the contrary were to materialize, I would have to reform my belief in order to remain in “good faith.” A bad faith attitude, by contrast, would be refusing to accept the critical evidence in favour of his friendship, even where no counter-evidence existed (or vice versa). But is “faith” the appropriate terminology to use in these examples? If there can be no shred of doubt about Pierre’s friendship, then I would rather say that I know he is my friend. And if there is any reasonable doubt – whether given explicit evidence or evidence that has not yet materialized – must I not recognize that I only believe Pierre is my friend? And is believing not also not-believing, according to Sartre? If so, the distinction between good faith and bad faith once again evaporates. One can have good faith in this sense about claims that are apodictically true, but then it is fruitless to use the term “good faith” instead of “knowledge.”
ideal of faith is in bad faith – but bad faith knows this, too. Sartre cannot consistently explain how it is possible for one particular type of faith – the “good” type – to sincerely buy into the disposition to be faithful, given his twin premises that consciousness is always conscious of itself and that faith is always based on incomplete evidence.

The generous man therefore cannot believe in good faith that he is generous any more than the courageous man can believe in bad faith that he is courageous, because both of them are aware that they must be simultaneously generous and not-generous, or courageous and not-courageous. As long as they harbour these beliefs, they are aware of harbouring these beliefs, and this willful duplicity is tantamount to bad faith. Both are mistaken about their being and ultimately their identity. Human identity transcends acts of generosity, as well as sexual history, professional labels, and social postures, according to Sartre: “I am never any one of my attitudes, any one of my actions” (Being and Nothingness 103). All beliefs to the contrary count, according to his view, as bad faith.

So while Sartre sometimes describes good faith as distinct from bad faith, and while some interpreters go so far as to praise good faith for embracing the freedom that bad faith flees, the most coherent explanation of good faith in Sartre precludes either of these diagnoses. Given Sartre’s assumption of the total translucency of consciousness, the project of good faith – to believe what one believes – can never take hold. Even the ideal of good faith is blameworthy on the same grounds that bad faith and sincerity are. Sartre affirms this clearly when he says: “[t]he ideal of good faith . . . is, like that of sincerity . . . an ideal of being-in-itself. Every belief is a belief that falls short; one never wholly believes what one believes” (Being and Nothingness 115). He adds: “It is indifferent whether one is in good faith or in bad faith, because bad faith reapprehends good faith and slides to the very origin

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28 See Santoni 81.
of the project of good faith” (Being and Nothingness 116). If this is the case, then the opposite of bad faith is not good faith. And insofar as bad faith is Sartre’s term for inauthenticity, authenticity requires avoiding both types of belief.

VI. Authenticity as the Abdication of Faith

We have seen that all types of faith for Sartre are erroneous judgments about a person’s true make-up: they neglect either the role of facticity or the role of transcendence. Authenticity by hypothesis avoids all of these mistakes and involves correctly apprehending oneself as the kind of being that one actually is. The key to understanding authenticity, then, is understanding the kind of beings that we are.

Sartre’s view of authenticity mirrors Heidegger’s in that it can only be grasped in the context of his broader ontological commitments. For both thinkers, authenticity is defined in terms of the structure of human being, and conceived as an individual’s quest to actualize the being of humanity in herself. The differences between their accounts of authenticity are reflections of the differences between their views about what is fundamental to human being. Hence for Heidegger, authenticity was fundamentally about temporality and death, while for Sartre, it will be explicited in light of freedom and nothingness, which are of course modifications of the ontology he inherited from Heidegger.

In Being and Nothingness Sartre explained the fruitless attempt by human beings to be their own foundation (or to “be God”) and how this desire is thwarted by the structure of the for-itself, which is both being and nothingness. In The War Diaries and Notebooks for an Ethics he explains how the nothingness of the for-itself must be harnessed to practice freedom and self-creation, since our being is not determined or externally founded. It is,
However, difficult for human beings to relinquish their search for a foundation and accept the absurdity and meaningless of their existence; this is why so many take refuge in bad faith.\textsuperscript{29} One must constantly root out bad faith and re-commit to one’s real existence. This “conversion,” which involves a lucid awareness of the nature of human existence, amounts to authenticity. The authentic attitude requires two general activities: assuming and willing.

Assumption is Sartre’s term for the profound acceptance of one’s being – including the fact that it is foundationless and constrained by facticity. This is not a fact to be merely observed or even reluctantly accepted. In order to practice the full freedom available to human beings, one must, ironically, first \textit{assume} everything that happens, including whatever is beyond one’s control.\textsuperscript{30} This move is necessary to Sartre’s account for obvious reasons: if human existence is foundationless, and authenticity requires taking hold of one’s existence, then one must appropriate all aspects of existence, including its lack of foundation and the vicissitudes of chance and absurdity, into one’s self-conception. He explains:

The characteristic of human reality, from the point of view which concerns us, is that it motivates itself without being its own foundation. What we call its freedom is that it is never anything without motivating itself to be it. Nothing can ever happen to it from outside. (Sartre, \textit{Diaries} 109)

Hence one must not only face up to one’s past actions (the proper use of sincerity), but one must also take responsibility for things that appear to have been caused heteronomously. One cannot be truly free while suppressing those aspects of oneself that one would prefer not to be associated with; this would be akin to signing away some of one’s freedom to a foreign

\textsuperscript{29}Note that it is only the bare fact of one’s existence that is initially absurd and meaningless. The practice of freedom introduces meaning into one’s existence and the world.

\textsuperscript{30}“Don’t accept what happens to you. That is too much and not enough. \textit{Assume it}” (Sartre, \textit{Diaries}, quoted in Keefe 89). Acceptance is “too much” because it can signal resignation or passivity. Acceptance is “not enough” because it does not yet assume responsibility.
power. To be externally determined is a value of the in-itself and a type of bad faith. Therefore, Sartre says, “the first assumption that human reality can and must make . . . is the assumption of its freedom. Which can be expressed by the following formula: one never has any excuse” (Diaries 113). He continues: “if I admit – and wish – never to have any excuse, my freedom becomes mine, I assume forever that terrible responsibility” (Sartre, Diaries 114). So the authentic person must begin by genuinely wanting the whole repertoire of his facticity, including the fact of his unyielding freedom.  

The assumption of freedom is crucial to achieving authenticity because it is not the case that inauthentic individuals are unfree. They have merely neglected to assume their freedom. In choosing inauthenticity, a person pretends to be an unfree thing, a being-in-itself, rather than face up to her freedom. But this escapism does not make her freedom actually disappear. The only unfree aspect of being-for-itself is the inescapability of its freedom. Sartre explains: “consciousness . . . is free, except to acquire the freedom to be free no longer. . . . It can freely make itself akin to things, but it cannot be a thing. All that it is, it makes itself be” (Diaries 113). This is the notorious paradox of freedom, our “condemnation” to be free. For Sartre, assuming this frightening fact is the first step toward authentic existence.

Still, the “assumptive conversion” is so far just an attitude; it must be followed up with action. The second requisite component of authenticity is the active willing to be what one wants to be. Given the condition of radical freedom, whereby no “outside” forces can determine being-for-itself, human reality demands constant self-creation. The creativity comes from the will and corresponds to the assumption of the human condition: “the

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31 We will see later how this criterion leads to strange consequences, such as the Jew having to want to be persecuted in order to retain his identity as a Jew.
assumptive conversion that presents itself as a value for consciousness is, therefore, nothing other than an intuition of the will, which consists in adopting human reality as one’s own” (Diaries 113). This means not to fashion oneself into a pre-determined type of being (a quest for the in-itself), but rather to live in the situation and choose from moment to moment. The subtlety here is easy to miss. It might appear that the waiter is “creating himself,” renewing his commitment to being a waiter on a daily basis as he shows up to work, and thus meeting the basic requirements of practicing authentic freedom. His actions are inauthentic, however, because he is throwing his freedom behind a superficial ideal of being – the waiter as an identity, a life’s calling – while obliterating the nothingness that makes him being-for-itself, always separate from his professional duties. As Sartre says, “authenticity consists in refusing any quest for being, because I am always nothing” (Notebooks 475).

The precise difference between pursuing a “quest for being” and “adopting human reality as one’s own” requires interpretation. Sartre seems to be suggesting that one must at once motivate, create, and will oneself to be what one chooses to be – which would presumably demand a certain amount of planning and goal-setting – and at the same time renounce all plans, long-term identity-forming activities, labels, and other “quests for being” that might, once achieved, be mistaken for ideals of being-in-itself. This seems untenable. Many normal human undertakings, such as careers or memberships in communities and organizations, confer on the doer certain inevitable features of “being” that could be easily interpreted by an observer to be inauthentic or unfreely adopted. One tends to behave according to the expectations and conventions of a social role, but one need not do so “inauthentically”. Assuming that Sartre does not intend to suggest that anybody with a profession is de facto inauthentic, what makes the waiter’s approach to his work a form of
bad faith, whereas another, authentic individual could (by hypothesis) freely choose to take on the same employment?

Sartre notes that the waiter’s “movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid” (Being and Nothingness 101). He concludes that the waiter’s comportment betrays a certain pretence – “he is playing at being a waiter in a café” – which belies his condition of bad faith (Being and Nothingness 102). But on what grounds can Sartre arrive at this diagnosis? Are all café waiters merely players? If not, then we need some indication of what differentiates café waiters who are in bad faith from those who are not. For whom is the waiter “a little too precise”? For a person who is attempting to pour coffee and clear dishes without spilling anything or causing too much noise? For the customers? For Sartre? The distinction between one who acts entirely freely and one who flees his freedom while performing the same action is perhaps more tenuous than Sartre implies.32

The nature of the willing or self-motivating that is called for by authenticity is not yet clear, first because its confirmation seems to rest on ineluctably internal states of mind, and second because the same actions could hypothetically demonstrate either an authentic attitude or its opposite. One plausible route out of this overdetermination is behaviour that flagrantly defies custom or eschews external influence, unlike the behaviour of someone who is trying to perfect a stereotype. One is tempted to think of waiters stripping off their aprons, wantonly throwing plates around the café, and eating croissants off their customers’ tables.33

Through such a satire we can see that Sartre’s account of authenticity is susceptible to one of the same critiques as Heidegger’s: authenticity’s implied overlap with originality and non-conformity suggests that socially accepted behaviour is rarely, perhaps never, authentic.

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32 Even if the waiter is in bad faith, Sartre is not especially qualified to make this judgment.
33 Such waiters might nonetheless be in bad faith in their own right, playing at being rebellious waiters.
and that one must recreate the world according to one’s own will in order to vouchsafe one’s authenticity. This problem is even more poignant in Sartre, however, because he endows consciousness with far greater freedom than Heidegger ever afforded to Dasein, and because his standard of self-willing is correspondingly more rigorous. As he says, “[a]uthentic consciousness . . . grasps itself in its deepest structure as creative. It makes there be a world in its very springing forth, it cannot see without unveiling, and, as we have seen, to unveil is to create what is” (Notebooks 515). To what extent must the surrounding world be created by consciousness in order for the latter to count as authentic? On one hand, Sartre’s ontology implies that every action contributes to world-creation regardless of its motivation – bad faith or authenticity – but on the other, he stipulates this same self-creation as the marker of authentic consciousness. What is the criterion for being creative in this way?

Like Heidegger, Sartre declines to provide formulaic instructions for acting authentically (in the sense of creating oneself) precisely because existentialism defers all particular choices to the individual. His picture of authentic existence, while different from Heidegger’s, nonetheless shares the same structure of a particular, yet-to-be-filled-in relationship to one’s own being. Since the being of the for-itself is to not be what it is and to be what it is not, authentic behaviour translates for Sartre into a kind of open-ended, anti-essential dwelling in the moment. The moment, or what he calls “the situation,” refers to the immediate set of conditions that provide the contours of consciousness’s radical freedom and allows for authenticity or inauthenticity.34 The world imposes on us both a requirement to act, as well as constraints on our possible actions. To be “in the situation” means to act

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34 “If man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as authentic or inauthentic according to the choices made in the situation” (Sartre, Anti-Semitism 90). Authenticity “can be understood only in terms of the human condition, that condition of being thrown into situation” (Sartre, Diaries 53).
spontaneously on the conditions presented without recourse to bad faith beliefs about the past or confining aspirations about the future. It means effectively renouncing all character traits and acting in each moment from a tabula rasa. If one were to act merely in accordance with habit or custom, one would be guilty of bad faith. If one acted in order to achieve a certain persona or future identity (even if it were different from one’s past), one would likewise be mistaking freedom for self-defined fate. Freedom is not practiced authentically when it is directed at the limitation of future freedom, according to Sartre. To behave freely in one moment while hoping or aspiring to be unfree in the next fails to meet his definition of authenticity.\(^{35}\) Without indicating precisely what a free, authentic response would look like, then, Sartre makes clear that there are many “incorrect” ways of acting in the situation.

Nonetheless it is surprising to find that he imagines each situation as demanding a “correct” response as well. He claims that authenticity in the situation “presupposes a patient study of what the situation requires, and then a way of throwing oneself into it and determining oneself to ‘be-for’ this situation” (Sartre, Diaries 54, emphasis added). And elsewhere he says that authenticity “consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves” (Sartre, Anti-Semite 90, emphasis added). The “truth” or “responsibility” spoken of in these passages refers to the necessity of correctly identifying and assuming the facticity of one’s situation, however undesirable it might be, for in authenticity “I grant myself no right for anything to happen to me other than what does happen to me” (Sartre, Diaries 114). In other words, the talk of a “correct” response to the situation is a reiteration of the premise that authenticity makes no attempt to flee facticity; it is not by any means a positive prescription for how to use one’s

\(^{35}\) Even aspiring to authenticity is a type of bad faith: “either the desire for authenticity torments us in the midst of inauthenticity, and then it’s itself inauthentic; or else it’s already full authenticity, though it’s unaware of itself and hasn’t yet taken stock of itself. There’s no room for a third estate” (Sartre, Diaries 219).
transcendence. Having correctly faced up to one’s situation, it still remains mysterious what it means to “[throw] oneself into it and [determine] oneself to ‘be-for’ this situation” (Sartre, Diaries 54).

Hence Sartre’s account of authenticity strongly resembles the account in Being and Time: namely, one ought to choose, but on what basis this choice ought to be made remains mysterious. Heidegger indeed appears to provide slightly more substantial guidelines than Sartre on this point. In Heidegger’s version of authenticity, we are at least admonished to attend to our finitude as a starting point for authentic action. Finitude thus becomes a general beacon for the pursuit of authenticity. For Sartre, most of the candidates for help in directing choice are ruled out by definition as bad faith, and no positive alternative is suggested in their place. The burden of freedom is even worse than he imagined: one must constantly choose, but authenticity furnishes no principle on which to choose one thing over another.

Beauvoir is stronger on this point, at least in a direct comparison between The Ethics of Ambiguity and Being and Nothingness.36 For her, the willing of one’s own freedom that is the starting point for authenticity entails a willing of others’ freedom that can become a principle for action. Authentic action and moral action both involve a deliberate promotion of freedom in oneself and others.37 Beauvoir believes that this follows logically from the ontology of the for-itself, since it is impossible to imagine my freedom in a secular world where others are unfree: I could have no reason to will any of my projects if I did not also will the freedom of others to pursue my projects after my death. The relationship between

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36 Sartre articulates a more nuanced view in Existentialism is a Humanism (1946). The Ethics of Ambiguity was published three years later.
37 Beauvoir is clear that freedom in all its senses is necessary: political, material freedom is the basis of ensuring each person’s ontological freedom to determine their lives. Being oppressed makes our ontological capacity for transcendence “fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals” (81). Sartre, by contrast, insists that “the slave in chains is as free as his master” (Being and Nothingness 703).
individuals is not simply one of conflict, as suggested in Being and Nothingness, but also of mutual dependence: “To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations” (71). Hence, while Beauvoir denies (along with Sartre) the existence of universal values or moral principles, she can coherently assert that the promotion of freedom is an authentic principle for action. This leads to her natural opposition to oppression, which is the deprivation of another’s freedom. Admittedly this principle is insufficient to motivate all action, but it is a starting point that can be logically embedded in her ontology.

Sartre defines authenticity as a recognition and fulfillment of the being of the for-itself, but the being of the for-itself is too ambiguous and inessential to provide any criterion for authenticity. In fact, not only can I not know how to be myself authentically within this radical existentialist framework, but it is difficult to understand what it means for me to “be” anything at all, to give substance to that part of the phrase “to be what it is not and to not be what it is.” This problem can be explicated with reference to one of his most in-depth examples: that of the Jew.

VII. This Jew Which Is Not One

One of Sartre’s longest case-studies of authenticity is contained in his post-war anti-racist work, Anti-Semite and Jew. In it he provides a psychological-existential analysis of the anti-Semite and an admonishment of this “bad faith” attitude, as well as an analysis of what it means to be a Jew. His diagnosis is that what it means to be Jewish is to find oneself in the situation of a Jew – that is to say, to live in a community that takes one for a Jew (and persecutes one accordingly). Authenticity for the Jew will then be defined as facing up to
this unsavoury situation. He denies that a Jew even exists prior to his situational response: “A Jew is not a Jew first in order to be subsequently ashamed or proud” (Sartre, Being and Nothingness 677). Jewishness, for Sartre, is an interaction between the persecutor and the persecuted, contrary to both the vicious stereotypes of the anti-Semite and the self-understanding of most Jews themselves.

Sartre begins by dispelling any notion that a Jew can be defined by physical or racial characteristics, or even religious belief. As he remarks, there is less consistency among Jews’ appearance than the anti-Semites would like to believe, and there is a wide degree of variance in observation, custom, and even theology among Jews (Sartre, Anti-Semite 64-67). Hence he concludes, “if I want to know who the Jew is, I must first inquire into the situation surrounding him” (Sartre, Anti-Semite 60).

The situation of the Jew turns out to be one that lacks much of the freedom enjoyed by non-Jews. For in Sartre’s estimation, Jewishness is defined by others, not by the individual, hence the Jew “cannot choose not to be a Jew” (Anti-Semite 89). Rather than locate the origins of Jewishness in ancient history or a commitment to monotheism, in fact, Sartre defines Jewishness in strictly modern socio-political terms, starting with the medieval Christian society that forced Jews to be money-lenders and then reviled them for money-lending (Sartre, Anti-Semite 68). The rest of his analysis of the Jewish situation is specific to this modern European context, marked by Christian anti-Semitism and the economic, social, and cultural separateness of Jews, and he is obviously responding to the culmination of European anti-Semitism in the Holocaust, the details of which had begun to surface by 1946. However, in this well-intentioned survey of the evils of anti-Semitism, there is no discussion of the meaning of Jewishness independently of how Jews have been persecuted. Startlingly,
Sartre effectively defines out of existence the possibility of Jews in the absence of Christians, or at least in the absence of a hostile non-Jewish majority, since “[t]he Jew is one whom other [non-Jewish] men consider a Jew” (Anti-Semite 69).

In accordance with Sartre’s theory of the situation, authenticity for the Jew is a function of assuming his condition, just as the assumption of facticity is the first step in any authentic attitude. The difference is that the facticity of the Jewish situation is overwhelming; he is free only to will himself into the gas chamber. As Sartre explains, “Jewish authenticity consists in choosing oneself as Jew – that is, in realizing one’s Jewish condition. . . . he knows himself and wills himself into history as a historic and damned creature” (Anti-Semite 136). This is the truth of his situation. Sartre hence considers it a profound display of bad faith for a Jew to attempt to renounce his Jewishness or deny the situation that confronts him, even though the temptation is understandable. The Jew, in sum, is “destined from the start to either inauthenticity or martyrdom” (Sartre, Anti-Semite 136).

This grim pronouncement is a surprising contribution to Sartrean ontology, which otherwise places great emphasis on the ability of the authentic individual to transcend adversity and will himself into being. Where is the Jew’s freedom to define himself? The Jew’s authenticity is being defined here as total submission to facticity. The situation has become more than a background for free action; it has eclipsed freedom altogether. And yet, at other points, Sartre reprises his usual definition of authenticity and applies it to the Jew: “the Jew, like any authentic man, escapes description . . . he is what he makes himself, that is

38 Sartre also describes this situation as “false”: “[the Jew,] this haunted man, condemned to make his choice of himself on the basis of false problems and in a false situation” (Anti-Semite 135). If the situation is defined by facticity, which is empirically true, what makes it “false”?

39 Whether Sartre realized it or not, denying one’s Jewishness or offering to convert would not have spared a Jew from the gas chamber anyway.
all that can be said” (Anti-Semite 137). So on the one hand the Jew is simply one whom others describe as a Jew, and on the other hand, he is a full human being, irreducible to in-itself attributes. It is impossible to know whether this is a genuine tension in Sartre’s analysis, or a deliberate separation of the status of the Jew qua Jew and his status qua man. This question has certainly not escaped him. He asks, “does the Jew exist? And if he exists, what is he? Is he first a Jew or first a man?” (Sartre, Anti-Semite 58). Insofar as he is a Jew, his authenticity is confined to the paltry choice to accept his situation rather than flee it. Perhaps there is also a sense in which he can behave as a man, minus the attribution of Jewishness, and project himself freely into the world just as any other, resisting description. But as Sartre makes clear, the Jew’s very behaviour is informed by the expectations and prejudices of others: “[Jews] have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype” (Anti-Semite 95). It seems then, that there is no way for the Jew to constitute himself as just a man – even an authentic man. So long as he is faced with his situation, he can only ever be an authentic or an inauthentic Jew.

This conclusion is surprisingly essentialist coming from Sartre, since the Jew’s Jewishness now appears as an unshakeable marker of identity: the Jew can never be free to define himself. At the same time, however, it is profoundly existentialist, because the identity has been constructed entirely by contingent external factors, and reflects nothing of the internal state of the Jew. Herein lies our concern.

Naturally, Sartre is advocating an overhaul of the Jewish situation, characterized as it is by anti-Semitism, which he perceives to be vile as well as in bad faith.\footnote{“We have here a basic fear of oneself and of truth” (Sartre, Anti-Semite 19).} Authenticity is indeed more challenging for the Jew than for others because it requires assuming this hateful
situation. Sartre attaches blame for the Jew’s inauthenticity more to his own society than to the Jew: “[t]his [inauthentic] behaviour is not inherited. It is an avenue of flight, and it is we who force the Jew to flee” (Anti-Semite 94). His ontology of the Jew, however, leads to the curious (and arguably anti-Semitic in its own right) conclusion that once his situation is changed, the Jew will no longer exist as such. He has defined the Jew throughout as a person who is in the Jewish situation, whom others take to be a Jew, who is persecuted, and who is challenged with the ultimatum of inauthenticity or martyrdom. If genuine assimilation were to be achieved, and martyrdom were no longer necessary, what would identify the Jew? It is perhaps true that “[t]he authentic Jew . . . renounces for himself an assimilation that is today impossible; he awaits the radical liquidation of anti-Semitism for his sons” – but what kind of Jewish identity will those sons have, on Sartre’s account, once they are no longer persecuted (Anti-Semite 150)?

Sartre wants to avoid both the well-intentioned attitude of viewing Jews like any other men, thereby stripping them of their Jewishness – the approach of the “democrat”41 – as well as the vicious attitude of denying Jews their individual humanity and seeing only their Jewishness – the approach of the anti-Semite. His explanation of the Jewish situation, however, makes it impossible to steer clear of these poles. Either the “situation” remains one of widespread anti-Semitism, in which case the Jew’s identity is inescapable, even by his own efforts, and his status as a free individual is likewise compromised; or the situation is overthrown, and the Jew’s identity is relinquished to the usual existentialist freedom, according to which identity traits are assumed only at the expense of authenticity. This dichotomy leaves no room for an understanding of Jewish identity as such, particularly in

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41 The democrat’s “defense of the Jew saves the latter as a man and annihilates him as a Jew” (Sartre, Anti-Semite 56).
times of relative safety and assimilation. What Sartre calls the “situation” (an elaboration of
facticity) has been invoked to replace any normal understanding of what it means to live a
Jewish life.

We have already seen that many adjectives – courageous, generous, cowardly, and so
on – define individuals on Sartre’s account only with respect to their pasts, never as ongoing
identity traits. To attempt to reduce oneself to such an identity is an act of bad faith;
authenticity requires renouncing all quests for being and committing to constant re-creation.
The example of the Jew introduces a new level of concern into what it means to be authentic
in Sartrean philosophy. Now, not only transient (or perhaps enduring) personality traits, but
also cultural or religious identity, are being called into question as a viable way of describing
oneself. This result is counterintuitive and possibly deeply unsettling. One would like to be
able to say that one’s Jewishness (or other comparable ethnic trait) consists in more than
having been contingently born to Jewish parents (a purely factual explanation, which, absent
other description, leads to an infinite regress anyway), or in being a member of a persecuted
community defined entirely by its persecutors. Sartre would say that, absent the ubiquitous
anti-Semitism he describes, a Jew partakes in Jewishness only retroactively, insofar as he
attended synagogue or observed certain features of Jewish law and custom in the past, but
that his future Jewishness, like all other traits, is a question mark. Most Jews (as well as
Muslims, Sikhs, and members of any number of other groups) would balk at this assertion.
Identity stretches into the future: it does not limit itself to the past.

Another case of identity deprivation can be found in Sartre’s earlier example of the
homosexual in bad faith. Recall that, for this individual, sincerity demanded that he
acknowledge his sexual history with other men, but authenticity demanded that he avoid
stamping himself as a homosexual once and for all. The effect of this analysis is to deny the meaning of homosexuality as an orientation, or rather to conflate sexual behaviour with sexual identity. Sexual orientation describes the person across a lifespan, not just his past behaviour. There should be some sense in which a person who has always been attracted to people of the same sex can meaningfully describe himself as gay – a trait that will likely remain stable throughout his life – and not just as a person with a certain sexual history. Sartre forbids this very natural use of identity language. Moreover, he rejects the basic assumption that we can have relatively stable internal characteristics – also known as a personality.

VIII. The “Extreme Difficulty of Achieving Authenticity”

Like Heidegger’s ideal, Sartre’s requirement for authenticity hinges on an unwavering commitment to his ontology. The authentic individual must renounce the normal urge to define himself in one way or another, or to view certain traits as enduring, possibly essential, features of his identity. He must constantly access a freedom that is all too willing to be crowded out by habit, expectation, laziness, or fear. The strength of resolve required to accomplish this could be what Sartre has in mind when he talks about the “extreme difficulty of achieving authenticity” (Diaries 52).

Achieving authenticity is also difficult on Sartre’s account because, just like courage and Jewishness, its existence is tenuous; in a given moment, one either is or is not authentic, “[b]ut that doesn’t . . . mean that one acquires authenticity once and for good” (Diaries 219).

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42 This distinction is widely accepted. Many gays at some point have sexual encounters with individuals of the opposite sex for a variety of reasons, but this behaviour does not necessarily change their orientation to heterosexual or bisexual.
Instead, because authenticity can only exist in a situation, and the situation is always changing, authenticity has to be re-calibrated all the time. Authenticity is not an undifferentiated attitude that can apply equally to all situations, as Sartre explains: “The instant that arrives is novel, the situation is novel: a new authenticity has to be invented” (Diaries 219).

So Sartre’s authenticity is difficult to achieve and impossible to maintain: even for the most dedicated existentialists, authenticity is likely to come and go. Sartre himself wrote in his diary: “I haven’t felt Nausea, I’m not authentic, I have halted on the threshold of the promised lands” (Diaries 62).

We predicted that authenticity would strain to fit into an existentialist way of life given Sartre’s overt rejection of the usual ways of understanding selfhood and identity. Authenticity is a surprising notion to come across in a philosophy according to which a person can never be who she is (or never just who she is). At least, it is at odds with the a priori understanding of authenticity as correspondence between identity and behaviour. If I am by definition not who I am, how can I behave in a manner consistent with that identity which I am not? Sartre creatively re-defines authenticity to incorporate (and, indeed, depend upon) the willing of that non-identity relation. Instead of correspondence between behaviour and identity, authenticity for Sartre requires correspondence between behaviour and the ontological structure of being-for-itself – which is precisely to not be itself.

For its emphasis on freedom and rejection of deterministic identity, Sartre’s account is a refreshing answer to stale secular and religious variations on “finding out who you really are,” which have just as much difficulty articulating who one really is as any existentialist account. But in his upheaval of the traditional metaphysics of selfhood, Sartre raises new,
perhaps more intractable challenges. In order for me to not be what I am (and to be what I am not), there must yet be some fact about what (or who) I am – otherwise, why differentiate at all between what I am and what I am not? We have discovered, however, that “what I am” for Sartre is no more than my facticity, which provides an inadequate basis on which to create my future self. If I am to transcend what I am (understood as what I have done) without simply re-creating myself in the same image, I need new motivation, new inspiration, or new values to act upon. Unlike in essentialist authenticity, these sought-after guidelines are precisely not to be furnished by who I am. Authenticity in Sartre requires me instead to choose on the basis of what I am not: on the basis of my nothingness, or my not-yet. But what I am not is necessarily silent, waiting to become itself through my free action. Nor are there external values or practical rules available to me for deliberation: the future me that I am condemned to create must issue forth only from some elusive, internal freedom, which, moreover, does not speak once and for all but must be accessed in every situation, in every moment. How, then, could Sartre – much less anyone else – reasonably expect himself to achieve authenticity and to assure himself that what he becomes has not been contaminated with what he (already) is?

Sartre’s authenticity, despite its unconventionality, does not escape the burden of providing an account of who one is as well as some theory about how to behave in order to realize authenticity. Without these features, the radical existentialist version of authenticity perfects the stereotype of the existentialist: as an abandoned, meaningless freedom, with no rules or values to give it direction, and no solace in the form of redemption or faith. I maintain that authenticity can be given a more robust description than this. However, it will require revisiting a version of selfhood that holds out the possibility of fundamental character
traits and legitimate continuity between past and future. Before we imagine what this new account might look like, we will pause to assess some of the many responses to Heidegger’s and Sartre’s respective projects.
At the present time we are distanced from existentialism by many years and many evolutions of Continental thought. Critiques of Heidegger and Sartre are so well rehearsed that they hardly garner attention, having been buried many times over by the new thought of critical theory, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, to name only a few main branches of later twentieth century Continental philosophy. I want to consider some of these critiques insofar as they pertain to the rejection of authenticity. I will focus on Adorno and Levinas, and conclude by considering Derrida’s re-reading of this tradition. Each of these three important figures raises influential critiques of Heidegger and/or Sartre. The chorus of condemnation directed at existentialism, and especially German existentialism, had the effect of silencing philosophical elaborations of authenticity for several decades. I will devote the first part of this chapter to summarizing and responding to the arguments that appear in the backlash against authenticity. Then I will survey some of the more recent responses to Heidegger and Sartre which are friendly to authenticity, and will suggest why they are largely ineffectual. Finally I will examine Charles Taylor’s influential account of authenticity and explain why it differs from the type of account I seek.

Most of the backlash against existentialism, and specifically its views about identity and authenticity, are directed toward the Heideggerian brand and include an ethical or political bent. Representing the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno’s biting critique of German existentialism, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), stems from his broader commitments to a Marxist view of history and a critical analysis of culture in terms of
violence and domination.¹ This puts him in strange company with Sartre, who also identified as a Marxist and offered similar cultural critique in some of his later works. Levinas’s engagement with Heidegger is informed by his view of the primacy of ethics, but unlike Adorno, Levinas believes that Heidegger’s work cannot be dismissed, overlooked, or merely replaced with a superior system. This attitude makes for a more careful, but no less adamant, critique of Heidegger’s philosophy. These critiques are united by a concern for the place of man² in German existentialism, and may be said to emanate from a humanist response to fundamental ontology. Derrida calls the use of “man” back into question, not in order to vindicate any particular account, but to draw attention to the conflation of metaphysics with onto-theology and anthropologism.

I. Identity and Totality

Adorno attacks Being and Time along many lines, as well as the work of Jaspers and others. Among his primary criticisms is the refrain that the authenticity espoused by these thinkers is meaningless jargon posing as something substantial.³ When pressed, the “jargon” cannot explain the meaning of authenticity or the qualities it implies. Adorno’s concern mirrors the one I raised in my analysis of Heidegger and Sartre as well: the difference between authenticity and inauthenticity, as described through pure ontology, reduces to an unstable dialectic because neither term can be adequately defined. Adorno remarks: “In

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¹ Thus while Adorno’s articulation of the view in The Jargon of Authenticity became the most infamous critique of existentialism from that movement, Adorno’s position could be said to be shared with Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Marcuse. Gadamer, by contrast, was mostly full of praise for Heidegger, who was his teacher. See Heidegger’s Ways.
² All of the philosophers mentioned use this non-inclusive term.
³ Although the title of Adorno’s text is The Jargon of Authenticity, what he calls “jargon” is much broader than this one term; ‘authenticity’ is an example of the terminology that Adorno finds empty and objectionable in the whole German existentialist tradition. Hence the critiques I describe might equally apply to other aspects of the work of Heidegger and his contemporaries, which are not my focus here.
many cases the distinction between essential and inessential, between authentic and inauthentic, lies with the arbitrariness of definition, without in the least implying the relativity of truth. Language uses the term ‘authentic’ in a floating manner” (123). Moreover, he continues, the ‘jargon’ “names no authentic thing as a specific characteristic but remains formal” (Adorno 125). These claims are similar to the critiques of Heidegger and Sartre that I have already presented.

Adorno produces many examples of the meaninglessness of the language of authenticity, picking on particular words that he claims are vacuous. He argues that words such as “authentic,” “Being,” and “Man” signal nothing but lend themselves to hypostasis, breaking down the presumed relation between sign and signified. The result is arbitrariness and mystification. The existentialists’ words, he contends, are deliberately ambiguous: “[j]ust as the jargon uses the double sense of the word ‘positive,’ it uses the ambiguity of the term ‘metaphysics,’ according to whether at a given moment one prefers nothingness or being” (Adorno 31). Such language can be used for whatever end the speaker chooses. Yet because of the implicit value built into concepts such as authenticity, the language always sounds important. Much as I argued in Chapter 2, Adorno observes that “authenticity” never ceases to present itself as a virtue, despite Heidegger’s protests to the contrary. This jargon has fooled an entire generation of pseudo-philosophers who revel in the existentialist endorsement of their very existence as something special. The jargon of authenticity, Adorno contends, “sells self-identity as something higher” (76), producing “people who consider themselves blessed simply by virtue of being what they are” (75). Hence Adorno’s critique is not just that the jargon is meaningless, like a child’s babbling, but also that it

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4 Adorno remarks that Heidegger “claims that he does not give a directive for philosophical judgment, but that he introduces descriptive and neutral terms in the manner of that which in earlier phenomenology was called investigation” (94).
portrays itself as important and irrefutable, like religion. The glorification of a simple identity relation, implied by authenticity, effaces difference and elevates self-sameness to some kind of ontological achievement. It passes off the profane as something sacred (Adorno 12).

Some of these charges seem to be purely semantic or ontological; however, for Adorno they have larger and more troubling implications. The absence of meaning, such as he finds in Heidegger’s “jargon,” is not just a metaphysical error but the hallmark of a dangerous political view. The empty language is reminiscent of the “culture industry” and modern capitalism, which liquidate the concept of humanity through abstraction and the denial of material historical circumstances. Trent Shroyer explains that “the jargon shares with modern advertising the ideological circularity of pretending to make present, in pure expressivity, an idealized form that is devoid of content” (xiv). The threat of such idealism is nothing less than the return of fascism. Replacing material, historical situations of man with an abstract concept of “Man” is a form of alienation; it takes humanity entirely out of context. Adorno says: “The empty phrase, Man, distorts man’s relation to his society as well as the content of what is thought in the concept of Man” (67). Like “bureaucracy,” a feature of capitalism and the culture industry, the jargon reduces humanity to words or commodities, elevating commodities to the status of humans. Adorno draws this Marxist conclusion very explicitly. While Heidegger appears to be talking about fundamental ontology, Adorno argues, “[i]n its slips of the tongue the jargon acknowledges that administration is its essence” (91).

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5 Adorno thus ironically describes authenticity (as it was then practiced) as a type of pretence or lie, which most people would describe as inauthentic.
6 “the apparent humanization of the thingly; the actual turning of man into thing: all this is the luminous copy of that administrative situation in which both abstract justice and objective procedural orders appear under the guise of face-to-face decisions” (Adorno 83).
An example of this “administrative” or “bureaucratic” language, which can have dire ethical consequences, is the very use of “Dasein” as a stand-in for humanity or individual humans in Heidegger’s writing. Adorno sees in this move – and especially in Heidegger’s description of the they and Mitsein – a dispersal of responsibility: “In Dasein’s everydayness the agency through which most things come about is one of which we must say that ‘it was no one!’” (103). For Adorno, the abstraction implicit in the use of Dasein masks the reality of specific human beings performing specific functions and standing in ethical relations to one another. Indeed, the excuse that “it was no one!” is characteristic of fascist regimes: “By leaving out of consideration the organizations and people which give commissions, the term establishes itself as a linguistic eyrie of totalitarian orders” (Adorno 88). This is a stronger version of the criticism I made regarding the anonymity of Dasein.

Totalitarianism thrives on the exclusion of difference, and Adorno likens the self-sufficient identity relation implied by authenticity to a destructive political philosophy. This is evident to Adorno in the way that Dasein’s identity is tied up with its mortality. As we have seen, Heidegger does not discuss identity in terms of individuals or ontic details – material circumstances, as Adorno would put it – but only in terms of death. The result is that “[d]eath and Dasein are identified; death becomes pure identity, as in an existent which can absolutely not happen to any person other than oneself” (Adorno 138). Adorno objects to this equation, which he sees as immediately self-negating: “The analysis of existence glides quickly over the most immediate and trivial aspect of the relation between death and Dasein, their simple nonidentity; the fact that death destroys Dasein truly negates it” (138). Moreover, the reduction of Dasein’s identity to its death is not only a logical error, according to Adorno, or an implausible description of human identity (as I argued earlier), but further
evidence of Heidegger’s fascist outlook: “Tautology and nihilism bind themselves into a holy alliance. Death is to be experienced only as something meaningless. That is alleged to be the meaning of the experience of death and, since death constitutes the essence of Dasein, such is also the meaning of Dasein” (139). Far from being a coincidence, then, Adorno regards the equation of Dasein’s identity with its death as inevitable. Morbidity is embedded in this type of philosophy. “Throughout history,” Adorno claims, “identity thinking has been something deathly, something that devours everything. Identity is always virtually out for totality” (139).

Adorno curiously indicts both authenticity and inauthenticity as they are described in \textit{Being and Time}, often exchanging the labels with the features Heidegger attributes to them. For example, Adorno associates authenticity with meaningless words, superficiality, and vagueness, which are precisely the attributes Heidegger uses to describe fallenness in the \textit{They}: idle chatter, curiosity, and ambiguity. Adorno might protest that in \textit{Being and Time} authenticity and inauthenticity are circular – I made such a claim myself – and hence what is attributed to the one might equally be attributed to the other. However, Adorno also argues that inauthenticity, which Heidegger himself appears to condemn, is even more noxious than it appears in \textit{Being and Time}, and for separate reasons. This is because the manifestations of inauthenticity (idle chatter and so on) are a result of preventable, dehumanizing historical conditions, and not benign existential possibilities. For example, Adorno claims that “[c]hatter is forced on men by a social structure which negates them as subjects long before this is done by the newspaper companies” (101-102). For Heidegger, by contrast, inauthenticity might constitute a “fallen” existential state, but not a materially problematic

\footnote{For different reasons, Sartre also rejects Heidegger’s view of death: “death is in no way an ontological structure of my being . . . There is no place for death in being-for-itself; it can neither wait for death nor realize it nor project itself toward it” (\textit{Being and Nothingness} 699).}
Adorno highlights the connection between such fallenness and the fascism with which Heidegger was himself associated: “Heidegger believes that under the domination of the They nobody needs to take responsibility for anything . . . This is precisely what came to pass under National Socialism” (102-103). Hence, although Adorno criticizes authenticity in much the same way that Heidegger implicitly impugns inauthenticity, Adorno argues that the latter does not go far enough in his own critique. Because he misses the devastating material consequences of fallenness, “[Heidegger] condemns idle chatter, but not brutality, the alliance with which is the true guilt of chatter, which is in itself far more innocent” (Adorno 102). Adorno’s Marxist reading of Being and Time, which situates all of Dasein’s existentials in concrete historical circumstances, reveals that inauthenticity might be just as dangerous as authenticity. He simultaneously adopts Heidegger’s definition of inauthenticity and wields it against Heidegger in the critique of authenticity, without ever claiming that they are the same.

Adorno’s critique of Heidegger comes across as polemical and acerbic – marked, one might say, by jargon of his own – but many of his points are reasonable and trenchant. He worries about how to separate authenticity from inauthenticity; he questions whether finitude can serve the monumental function Heidegger has assigned it, namely of explaining Dasein’s essence; he observes that the ontological language of Being and Time results in abstractions that are deliberately divorced from historical or material reality; and he doubts that authenticity ever escapes the value, or “sacredness,” that is imputed to it. I articulated versions of all these concerns in my own reading of Heidegger. Adorno’s criticisms are more pronounced because they issue from a Hegelian-Marxist agenda coloured by a post-war suspicion of anything resembling Nazism. Adorno’s purpose is not to correct the
existentialist account of authenticity, but to argue for its detrimental effects on philosophy and culture so that it can be buried alongside other “totalitarian” ideologies. In his view, no philosophy of identity and no idealist ontology of the subject can explain the human situation. For him, Heidegger must be countered with a politically-driven philosophy of difference, based on humanity’s material, rather than existential, state.

We may sympathize with Adorno’s concerns about the implications of Heideggerian authenticity without thereby relegating it to the scrapheap of philosophy, as he does. That the culture of authenticity in his time was relatively vacuous and that Heidegger was himself a supporter of fascism are historical contingencies, not necessitated by the notion of authenticity. The glorification of self-sameness might have served historically as a justification for the eradication of differences, but it need not do so: it is not impossible to conceptualize the ideal of authenticity existing alongside the ideal of pluralism. Indeed, we might recognize the value of difference to a greater extent if each individual is expected to be identical only to herself, and not to others, as homogenizing regimes often suggest. Adorno seems to believe that self-identity is inherently noxious. In his zeal for destroying Heidegger’s philosophy, Adorno ploughs through certain subtleties, and misses the promise and intrigue of authenticity outside this poisoned context.

II. “Fearsome Authenticity”

Emmanuel Levinas shares Adorno’s worry about the ethical implications of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, but his orientation is one of fraught engagement rather than hostile dismissal. Levinas – who was influenced by debates between Heidegger and his humanist adversary, Ernst Cassirer – wrestles with the challenge of understanding being

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8 See “Horizons of Significance” below.
without sliding into the totalization and solipsism of fundamental ontology (Levinas, *Humanism* ix). His answer is to posit something “otherwise than being,” something that remains permanently other and inaccessible to our experience but nonetheless makes ethical demands on us. He writes little about authenticity specifically, but as Cohen notes, “[a] critique of Heidegger is found on almost every page of Levinas’s philosophical writings” (Cohen xxviii). Levinas sees *Being and Time* as a watershed in philosophy: despite its latent fascism, Levinas is unable to dismiss Heidegger as Adorno does. He writes: “nothing has been able to destroy in my mind the conviction that the *Sein und Zeit* of 1927 cannot be annulled, no more than the few other eternal books in the history of philosophy” (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 208).

Levinas’s ethical compunctions regarding *Being and Time* are addressed in the context of his own theory of ethics.⁹ He concurs with Adorno that Heidegger’s work is the apotheosis of a philosophy that eviscerates the subject, the human – who for Levinas is defined by his very responsibility to other humans. The self-centredness, the “always mineness” of authenticity is precisely what makes authenticity so un-human: “Authenticity, based on the notion of ‘mineness,’ must remain pure of all influence undergone, without admixture, without owing anything to anyone, outside of everything that would compromise the noninterchangeability, the uniqueness of that I of ‘mineness’” (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 226). For Levinas, humanity is first and foremost an awareness of, and devotion to, the other – not myself. With Heidegger and the events of the early-mid twentieth century, Levinas perceives a “crisis of humanism” (*Humanism* 45).

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⁹ Levinas was not the only prominent Heidegger commentator who approached his critique from the point of view of ethics. Martin Buber and Emil Fackenheim, among others, took a similar approach.
Whereas Adorno perceives a political threat lurking within the structure of the they, through which independence and critical thinking are leveled down into passive conformity, Levinas is concerned that if anything Heidegger tries to disassociate Dasein from the they too much. The social withdrawal that is a prerequisite for authenticity is incommensurate with Levinas’s understanding of selfhood: “the concern-for-being of the human being-there also bears the concern for the other man, the care of one for the other. It is not added onto being-there, but is a constitutive articulation of that Dasein” (Entre Nous 212). Heidegger, he intimates, correctly builds Miteinandersein (being-with-others) into the existential structure of Dasein, but thus makes authenticity, with its opposition to the they, into a violent, nearly inhuman event – an “upheaval”:

Hence the return to the authentic is no longer sought in having recourse, outside the ‘they’, to a substantive and substantial identity of the I, nor through the mediation of some sort of relations that would reach out toward others through a different path than that of the with and for – the mit-einander and the Für-sorge – which is what is entailed in being-in-the-world... Eigentlichkeit – the departure from the ‘they’ – is recovered through an upheaval, within the everyday existence of the ‘they’ brought about by a resolved and free determination made by being-there which is thus being-for-death, anticipating death in the courage of anxiety. In the courage of anxiety, not in the fear and evasions of the everyday! Perfect authenticity! (Levinas, Entre Nous 213-214)

In evocative passages such as this one, which are found throughout Levinas’s readings of Heidegger, Levinas articulates a fundamental skepticism about the nature of identity as Heidegger describes it: there can be no identity outside the ‘They.’ Levinas rejects “the idea
of an ego that is identified in finding itself. The reunion of self and self is a flop. Interiority is not rigorously interior. I is an other. Is not identity itself a failure?” (Humanism 60). Heidegger mistakenly equates selfhood with self-identity to the exclusion of all others. The “interiority” demanded by authenticity is empty: “Confidant but also speaker, harbinger, messenger of being, man does not express any deep interior” (Levinas, Humanism 61).

Having exiled all social and moral relations from the definition of authenticity and replaced them with pure being, Heidegger leaves the notion of identity bereft of any meaning; man’s interior does not consist in its ontological privilege as the nearest being to Being, but rather in its ethical responsibility to other men.10

For Levinas, it is not self-identity that needs to be restored to man, but subjectivity: “The end of subjectivity began with the twentieth century. The social sciences and Heidegger lead to the triumph of mathematical intelligibility, sending the subject, the individual, his unicity and his election back into ideology, or else rooting man in being, making him its messenger and poet” (Humanism 61). Identity and authenticity talk strip man of his subjecthood on a misguided search for self-sufficiency. Man is never self-sufficient; the supposition that he is derives from blindness to “the unreal reality of men persecuted in the everyday history of the world,” much as Adorno argued (Levinas, Humanism 67-8). Subjectivity can only be understood by going outside the self. Levinas explains: “No one can stay in himself; the humanity of man, subjectivity, is a responsibility for others, an extreme vulnerability. The return to self becomes interminable detour” (Humanism 67).

For all these reasons, Levinas is unsurprisingly critical of Heidegger’s equation of authenticity with being-toward-death. Much like Adorno, Levinas rejects the claim that death individualizes Dasein and eludes the understanding of others: “The other concerns me

10“In being as such, there cannot be meaning” (Levinas, God 183)
as a neighbor [prochain]. In every death is shown the nearness of the neighbor…” (God 17). Far from signaling man’s solitude or self-sufficiency, then, the death of another “ruptures” man’s identity and allows for “sympathy and compassion” (Levinas, God 13). Whereas Heidegger describes death as fundamentally non-relational (unbezüglich), Levinas regards all dying as relational: “My being affected by the death of the other is precisely that, my relation with his death. It is, in my relation, my deference to someone who no longer responds, already a culpability – the culpability of a survivor” (Humanism 12). Moreover, while Heidegger denies the possibility of even metaphorically “dying for another,” Levinas proposes dying for another as the very height of subjectivity, “[t]he possibility of sacrifice as a meaning of the human adventure” (Entre Nous 227). Heidegger’s ontology leaves no space for the understanding of death as an ethical choice. Levinas says, “[s]acrifice cannot find a place for itself in an order divided between the authentic and the unauthentic” (Entre Nous 217). This, in short, is Levinas’ entire critique of Heidegger’s ontology: in trying to define man in relation to Being alone, Heidegger denies that man’s subjectivity is always circumscribed by his moral responsibility to others, his capacity for sacrifice. The ethical is completely lost in authenticity: “for Heidegger, all ‘relations with others’ are dissolved . . . Fearsome authenticity! You can see what I would reject” (Levinas, Entre Nous 226).

III. Reading ‘Man’

Although Levinas came to philosophical prominence several decades after the publication of Being and Time, Heidegger had already been challenged on the problem of man’s relation to other men in his philosophy. In response to Beaufret’s question, “Comment redonner un sens au mot ‘Humanisme’? [How can we restore meaning to the
word ‘humanism’?]” Heidegger composed the “Letter on Humanism” (1949), in which he re-affirmed the primacy of Being over man and differentiated himself from Sartre, who sought to reconcile existential ontology and humanism (Heidegger, Pathmarks 241). The Letter would become a crucial text in Heidegger’s oeuvre and an important determinant of future Heideggerian scholarship. In it, Heidegger

rejects the traditional vision of humanism for which the human is central. It seems like little more than a play on words when, after having criticized all known versions of humanism as merely metaphysical, that is, instances of humanity’s arrogantly displacing the ‘truth of being,’ he nevertheless appropriates the term humanism to characterize his own ontology. (Cohen xx)

The appropriation of humanism to which Cohen refers concerns Heidegger’s distinction between the humanism of man and the humanism that can be derived from his claim that “[t]he human being is the shepherd of being” (Pathmarks 260). Heidegger asks: “Is this not ‘humanism’ in the extreme sense? Certainly. It is a humanism that thinks the humanity of the human being from nearness to being. But at the same time, it is a humanism in which not the human being but the human being’s historical essence is at stake in its provenance from the truth of being” (Pathmarks 261). He continues: “‘Humanism’ now means, in case we decide to retain the word, that the essence of the human being is essential for the truth of being, specifically in such a way that what matters is not the human being simply as such. So we are thinking a curious kind of ‘humanism’” (Pathmarks 263).

At stake in this awkward re-definition of humanism is Heidegger’s insistence on the incompatibility of metaphysics, with its anthropologistic foundation, and pure ontology, which thinks the being of man only in relation to being itself. Derrida argues that post-
Heideggerian thought, especially in France, missed this distinction: “the critique of anthropologism remained totally unnoticed, or in any event without effect” (Ends of Man 118). Instead, by way of an inaccurate reading of “Dasein,” which Sartre rendered as “human reality,” post-war French philosophers commonly read into Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger an anthropologistic humanism that Derrida believes is absent (Derrida, Ends of Man 115, 119). Hence what appeared as continuity between the pre-war German thinkers and post-war French thinkers was in fact a rupture, as Heidegger insists in the Letter. Referring to Sartre’s Existentialism and Humanism, he clarifies: “‘existentialism’ has nothing at all in common with . . . Being and Time” (Heidegger, Pathmarks 250). In rejecting humanism as it was then understood, Heidegger was simultaneously re-asserting his original ontological project.

The impact of these debates about humanism for authenticity is that the meaning of ‘man,’ the subject of authenticity, changes depending on how one reads the German texts. On the anthropologistic French reading – including, Derrida contends, Sartre’s – Hegel’s development of the concept of man is overlooked, erasing the relationship between phenomenology and anthropology, which remain distinct.  

11 Man does not remain the same in Phenomenology of Spirit, but is relevé or aufgehoben, in such a way that “[t]he thinking of the end of man . . . is always already prescribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man” (Derrida, Ends of Man 121, original italics). In Heidegger, Derrida says, “[m]an and the name of man are not displaced in the question of Being such as it is put to metaphysics. Even less do they disappear. On the contrary, at issue is a kind of reevaluation or revalorization of the essence and dignity of man” (Ends of Man 128). Authenticity in Being and Time deals with the essence of man not anthropocentrically, as do humanisms that stress

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11 See Derrida, Ends of Man 120.
man’s reason or ability to bring value into the world, but ontologically, in his relation to being. Sartre, Heidegger contends, “stays with metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of being” (Pathmarks 250). Hence, according to Derrida and Heidegger, Sartre’s account of authenticity corresponds to a metaphysical, anthropologistic humanism that thinks man “as one living creature among others in contrast to plants, beasts, and god,” whereas Heidegger’s authenticity concerns man only insofar as he thinks and discloses the truth of being (Pathmarks 246).

Sartre’s humanism, however, is distinct from the humanism that finds value in man’s dignity or reason. Existentialism and Humanism is the first text in which Sartre explicitly avows any brand of humanism, having previously disparaged it in Nausea and The War Diaries. In the former, Roquentin famously rails against humanism in all its forms. In The War Diaries Sartre observed that war constitutes “the complete loss of all human dignity; and in principle, this is not such a bad thing” (Sartre quoted in Simont 126, original italics). Reconciling the apparent disparity between this view and his own humanism, Sartre clarifies that “the word humanism has two very different meanings” (Existentialism 54). The humanism he defends, and which is consistent with his existentialism, dispenses with the conceit of human dignity as the foundation of human value. As such, his humanism remains distinct from the usual anthropologistic readings that Heidegger and Derrida call into question. This Kantian-inflected humanism “consists in taking the person as an end in himself or herself, or as a value,” but according to Sartre, “[a]s soon as we make the human being into a value, we are already in the territory of the inhuman” (Simont 136). The existentialist humanism professed by Sartre “will never take man as the end, since man is

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12 Even in light of this clarification, Juliette Simont argues that Sartre changed his view between Nausea and Existentialism and Humanism, and that in the former text, “Roquentin had foreseen and criticized in advance a position that Sartre was to adopt” (129).
still to be determined” (Existentialism 55). It is humanist because it stresses the unique being of humans as being-for-itself, which is not valuable qua being but as the only being through which value comes into the world. Derrida still considers this anthropologistic, but Sartre has resources for distinguishing himself from other post-Heideggerian humanisms on which man is intrinsically valuable.

In post-war Continental thought, then, the critique of authenticity was bound up with a re-thinking of man and humanism. Heidegger’s account in Being and Time was the greatest casualty of this backlash, but if Sartre’s self-analysis is taken seriously, his account also differs from the standard anthropologistic humanism that re-asserted itself in contrast to existentialism. As we see in the examples of Adorno and Levinas, one of the main causes of hostility toward Heideggerian ontology was the concern that it either defined ethics out of human existence or else directly justified fascism. Moreover, the hostility toward the metaphysics of identity persisted whether the word used was “authenticity,” “Ereignis,” or anything else. Insofar as Sartre was able to convince his contemporaries that his version of existentialism opposed tyranny, there was less reason to quibble with his precise definition of ‘humanism’ or of ‘authenticity.’ But Sartre’s account of authenticity, like Heidegger’s, faded precipitously from academic discourse for several decades, having been sullied by its connotations of oppression and totality.

The backlash against authenticity and existentialism did not put the matter to rest for good. Discussions about and defences of authenticity in the Continental tradition began to flourish again in approximately the mid-1980s, and they have picked up momentum over the last two decades. Some of these revivals of authenticity explicitly pick up where existentialism left off, offering modifications and elaborations of Heidegger or Sartre that are
intended to rescue the concept from certain criticism. Others attempt to tackle the concept from new angles, reading authenticity through hermeneutics or communicative action theory to reinvigorate the intuitive notion of an authentic self. In the remainder of this chapter I review the most important ideas in this variegated phenomenon, which I call the Second Wave of Authenticity. They are crudely divided into three overlapping themes: intersubjective authenticity, the ethics of authenticity, and Taylor’s ‘horizons of significance.’

IV. Intersubjective Authenticity

As we have seen, a recurring theme in the critique of authenticity has centred on the implausibility or undesirability of an isolated self that must retreat from others to find its own subjective truth. Proponents of authenticity in the Second Wave have attempted to avert this consequence in several ways. In this section I discuss the strategy of defining authenticity as an intersubjective enterprise, hence as one that cannot be achieved through unchecked self-determination. The strategy behind this trend is to imbue the authentic self with dialogical content and to situate it in an interdependent system of individuals or communities. As I show later, this move dovetails with another prominent trend in contemporary authenticity, the search for an ethics of authenticity.

i. Retrieving Mitsein

In Chapter 1 I highlighted the problematic tension in *Being and Time* between the thrown, socially enmeshed Dasein of Division I and the withdrawn, radically independent Dasein of Division II. Since the bulk of Heidegger’s account of authenticity is explained in
Division II, and since the turn to authenticity seems to depend explicitly on the segregation of Dasein from das Man, some interpreters have concluded either that Heidegger’s account is inconsistent or that authenticity is inherently antisocial and non-conformist. Nonetheless, there are sufficient cues in Division I of Being and Time to prompt some scholars to reconsider the apparent change of tone in the second half of the text. Authenticity in Heidegger would be more consistent if the condition of being-with-others, described in Division I, remained a core supposition in the later discussion of Dasein’s resoluteness.

The argument for Heidegger’s intersubjective authenticity, as I call it, typically unfolds like this. First, the role of Mitsein (being-with-others) and Fürsorge (solicitude) in Division I are carefully analyzed to reveal that Heidegger views Dasein’s existence as being inescapably entangled in the being of others. Second, Dasein is assumed to recognize, in this context, its thrownness into a given cultural historical situation, and consequently its “ownmost being-guilty” as a precondition to authenticity. According to Richard Polt, “guilt” in Heidegger refers to the indebtedness arising from having a past I cannot control, and the responsibility arising from having a future that I must choose (89). Guilt precedes the call of conscience, which opens up Dasein’s authentic possibilities to itself. The final step in the argument from intersubjectivity, then, is to show that a full appreciation of Dasein’s possibilities cannot be achieved without first embracing Dasein’s thrown condition of interdependence on other beings. Individual authenticity depends on a community of beings dedicated to the mutual pursuit of authenticity. In some cases this last step leads to a further conclusion about ethics, which I investigate in more depth later; the thought is that the recognition of our interdependence as beings capable of authenticity necessitates an ethical approach to being-with-others. Either way, the gist of the intersubjective interpretation of
Corey Anton’s argument is illustrative because he defends both intersubjective and ethical claims about authentic Dasein. He describes “sociality” as one of four “ontological conditions of the human self” along with embodiment, symbolicity, and temporality (Anton 9). Together these tendencies construct a version of Dasein more normatively constrained than the one Heidegger explicitly presents; like other proponents of intersubjective authenticity, Anton argues that Dasein’s very existence entails certain beliefs about other beings. With ‘sociality’ Anton designates Dasein’s being-with-others in a way that accentuates intersubjective responsibility: “To encounter others authentically is to work to free them for their possibilities of caring” (157). Since not everyone’s possibilities are compatible with everyone else’s, he goes on to say, “[a]uthenticity . . . is not in any way a radical autonomy or a total freedom to ‘do one’s own thing’ . . . it is a dutiful autonomy, one liberated by indebtedness” (Anton 160).

Anton’s account and others like it have merit, but they also raise suspicion by interpolating features of Dasein into Heidegger’s view. They are correct in identifying the social elements of human existence, which are usually underplayed in readings of authenticity, and emphasizing Heidegger’s discussion of Mitsein and Fürsorge in Division I of Being and Time. Their success seems to rest, however, on a privileging of this perspective over the devastatingly anti-social one that accompanies Dasein’s retreat from das Man in Division II. What is best understood as a tension in Heidegger is forced into deceptive consistency by this privileging. The claim that authenticity and caring for others go hand-in-
hand is misleading because it juxtaposes disparate claims that Heidegger never sought to reconcile. Likewise the belief that authentic Dasein chooses its possibilities out of duty to others is not fully persuasive because Heidegger himself is reticent on this point. In fact, the opposite is implied as Heidegger claims that the they levels down the everyday possibilities of Dasein, and describes authenticity as an overcoming of these constraints rather than as a voluntary subjection to them. He says: “being-with-one-another as such creates averageness... The care of averageness reveals, in turn, an essential tendency of Dasein, which we call the levelling down of all possibilities of being” (Heidegger, Being and Time 119/127). Being-with-one-another is ruled by the they, and Heidegger explicitly contrasts this way of being with authenticity: “[t]he self of everyday Dasein is the they-self which we distinguish from the authentic self, the self which has explicitly grasped itself” (Being and Time 121/129). Here Heidegger has stated fairly unequivocally that authentic Dasein is not motivated by duty to others; if anything, authenticity entails the wilful repudiation of such duties.

The reading of Heidegger exemplified by Anton is compelling because it imposes structure on a highly complicated and in many ways ambiguous text. Intersubjective readings of authenticity purport to spell out what is only implied in Heidegger’s account, which after all is also an incomplete one. Their conclusions might be appealing because they reflect either our personal intuitions, or philosophical protocol, or both. Embedded in the intersubjective argument, for example, is the assumption that Dasein acts rationally in response to certain environmental conditions. The second and third steps of the argument

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13 The envisioned Division III was never written, and Being and Time was followed by the notorious “Kehre” [the “Turn”] in which Heidegger pursued a new ontological orientation. Joanna Hodge suggests, however, that Basic Problems of Phenomenology, published in the same year, might be read as Division III of Being and Time.
depend on Dasein recognizing the being of other human beings and choosing to constrain its own possibilities in light of their interdependence. These are steps that we might expect of a rational agent in contemporary moral philosophy or action theory. A self-aware agent thrust into the world of Mitsein would probably realize that everyone shares her capacity for fulfillment. Furthermore, if Anton were correct about the nature of this interdependence, she would also realize that cooperation with others is necessary for anyone to achieve personal fulfillment. An individual interested in authenticity would therefore consider a concernful approach to others rational and self-beneficial. This is perhaps the spirit in which Anton argues that “authenticity refers to the quality of our concern which characterizes our being-in-the-world with others” (159). However Heidegger belies this definition, even in Division I, by insisting that being-with-others entails being fallen, indistinguishable from others, and hence inauthentic: “The self of one’s own Dasein and the self of the other have neither found nor lost themselves. One is in the manner of dependency and inauthenticity” (Being and Time 120/128). Everyday Dasein must escape the influence of others in order to find itself. This transition – described in Division II via the call of conscience – does not seem to figure into the intersubjective accounts.

Despite Heidegger’s discussion of Dasein’s concern for others, then, the intersubjective view of authenticity depends on a radical undermining of other integral claims in the text. The intersubjective view is valuable insofar as it presents a picture of what authenticity could or perhaps should look like, but it does not derive persuasively from Heidegger’s account. The skeptics who charge Heidegger’s account of authenticity with ignoring the being of others are on firmer, if less palatable, ground.
ii. Beyond Domination and Submission

Critiques of Sartre have rarely focussed on his conception of authenticity; indeed, it garners very little attention in most Sartrean scholarship in general. So while there has been significant debate over the nature of relations with others in Sartre’s work, this has not generally been linked to a critique of his account of authenticity as menacingly individualistic. As we shall see later, however, one’s reading on the plausibility of being-for-itself recognizing the freedom of others is integral to one’s reading on the possibility of existentialist ethics as Sartre defines it.

Sartre is susceptible to similar criticism as Heidegger for denying the possibility of mutually sustaining relationships with others. Since he claims in Being and Nothingness that being-for-itself is objectified when it comes into contact with others, there is legitimate concern that humans – whether authentic or not – are doomed to interact with others at the expense of our own selfhood. The dual nature of being-for-itself as both subject and object, both being-in-itself and radically free, collapses under the introduction of an Other. Robert Wicks explains: “Either we turn other people into objects under our look, or we allow them to turn us into objects under their look. On this theory, interrelationships are dominance-submission relationships at the core” (48-9). The dominant posture is what Sartre refers to as “arrogance” while the submissive one is what he means by “shame” (Being and Nothingness 386). Even love relationships are invariably infected by these unconscious power games (Being and Nothingness 482). The sadomasochistic ultimatum between being an object or making the other into one renders the possibility of being-for-others, or roughly what Heidegger called Mitsein, nearly unthinkable in Being and Nothingness. I cannot merely exist alongside others without my selfhood being affected by their presence and vice versa;
yet as soon as I encounter an other, a battle is waged. Hence Sartre declares that “[c]onflict is the original meaning of being-for-others” (Being and Nothingness 475).

At the same time, Sartre’s later works articulate a more nuanced conception of being-with-others, and some scholars have used this more evolved thought to interpolate different intentions into Being and Nothingness. For instance, Kevin Craig Boileau uses Sartre’s theory of groups as explained in Critique of Dialectical Reason to illustrate how the ontology outlined in Being and Nothingness allows for reciprocity and mutual authenticity. He claims that the “mediating Third” discussed in the Critique enables positive group relations in which each is recognized as a being-for-itself, thereby rectifying the conflict that naturally accompanies interpersonal relations in Sartre’s early ontology (Boileau 107). Thomas Anderson, meanwhile, notes the role of “comprehension” in Notebooks for an Ethics, which go beyond the simple and dark dichotomy of subjectification and objectification. “Unlike knowledge or the look,” he says, “which simply objectify the other subject, comprehension grasps the other as freedom” (Anderson 148).

Although Sartre’s conception of authenticity is not explicitly linked to his theory of interpersonal relationships, it is clear that his account will be difficult to reconcile with the view that others support and depend on my authenticity, at least if it is based on the ontology articulated in Being and Nothingness. The authors who have tried to read authenticity through Sartre’s later thinking on being-for-others have generally assumed that willing my own freedom requires willing the freedom of everyone else, an ethical twist which I examine below.
V. Ethics and Authenticity

Probably the most widespread and recognizable trend in the recent revival of authenticity has been to define and defend an existentialist ethics. In many cases, authenticity serves as the focal point for this endeavour. These efforts go beyond the purview of ‘intersubjective authenticity’ by not merely showing that authenticity requires the input of others, but more boldly by claiming that it serves as an ethical guideline for individual persons. The trend is especially fashionable in Heideggerian scholarship – ironically so, since Heidegger both denied he was doing ethics in his philosophy and performed no redeeming ethical acts in public. Sartre at least seemed troubled by the anti-ethical conclusions attributed to his ontology, and also devoted a good portion of his life to political activism on behalf of the oppressed.

The fact that the tenets of existentialism appeared to be incompatible with ethical realism was already the topic of much debate in the 1950s to 1960s. While debate over the possibility of existentialist ethics has continued more or less uninterrupted since the publication of Being and Time and Being and Nothingness, the overwhelming tendency in the last twenty years has been to vindicate the possibility through a novel excavation of the texts. In this section I will consider some of the contributions to this literature that depend on a defence of authenticity to make their arguments.

14 Because “ethics” is such a broad term, I use it here to refer simply to the acknowledgment and protection of others’ interests, even when they conflict with my own.
15 See, e.g., Hazel Barnes An Existentialist Ethics (1967), Norman Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Ethic (1960).
16 On the connection between Dasein and ethics, see Lawrence Hatab, Ethics and Finitude. For an important study on Heidegger’s ethics that does not address the role of authenticity in his thought, see Joanna Hodge, Heidegger and Ethics.
i. Cosmopolitan Dasein

As we saw in Chapter 1, Heidegger’s account of authenticity leaves several important points obscure, chief among them the question of which choices count as authentic, and which authentic choices, if any, converge with moral ones. Some sympathetic Heidegger scholars have scoured Being and Time for clues that could be used to defend an ethics based on Heidegger’s ontology and Dasein’s authenticity. Many proponents of Heideggerian ethics also point to his later writings, such as Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning, as promising sources; but since Heidegger’s fullest account of authenticity is provided in Being and Time, it is the readings of this text that are most important for our purposes here.

To begin I shall indicate the information about authenticity in Being and Time which, on my reading, precludes an understanding of ethics as authenticity, at least as far as Heidegger explains it in the text.

First, as far as Heidegger tells us, authenticity is occasioned by the call of conscience pulling Dasein ever further inward, and its effect is to cause Dasein to choose its ownmost possibilities. Dasein can in theory choose anything while being authentic. Presumably Heidegger intended for choice to be understood as issuing from reasons or preferences, but the injunction contained in authenticity as resoluteness (Entschlossenheit) is only to choose – not to choose by any particular standards. Moreover the formal notion of self forwarded in Being and Time gives no indication of what types of reasons or preferences are apt to move authentic Dasein, or why these are superior to inauthentic ones. The mere fact of choosing therefore by no means guarantees that the choices made are more reasonable or ethically sound than the default would have been. Choice can be arbitrary, capricious, or whimsical,
but choice nonetheless. This implies that complete authenticity might be achieved without any regard for the consequences of authentic choices.

Second, even ruling out this type of capriciousness and assuming that Dasein always has reasons for its choices, Heidegger’s version of authenticity remains subjective: there are no built-in restraints or checks on Dasein’s choices (pace Anton et al.), and this can make authenticity a dangerous weapon. Without any external rules or norms to constrain or guide choice, not only is everything permitted, but even the most heinous of Dasein’s orientations could turn out to be valuable qua authentic. The possibility of ethical realism evaporates once each authentic individual is designated as the locus of truth. As Zuidervaart says, authenticity divorces truth from public consensus, turning all judgments into matters of private authentication, and “what cannot be publicly authenticated is not truth at all” (Authentication 36).

A third consequence deals with ethics of another sort. It could be argued that authenticity yields a certain code of conduct, if not toward others, then at least toward oneself. Heidegger implies that one owes it to oneself to be authentic. However, the possibility of deriving a personal ethics from Heidegger’s authenticity faces obstacles of its own. For in Being and Time there is no identifiable self but only an anonymous vehicle for making choices. One can hardly have ethical obligations to some abstract psychological (or as Heidegger would say, existential) capacity, the way one might have an obligation to a particular self characterized by certain values or preferences constitutive of a unique identity. Since, on my account, authenticity necessitates a truth to be authentic, the responsibility to be authentic is untenable absent a fuller explanation of the self. A tension persists between Heidegger’s way of referring to Dasein as something that can be “called” and “found,” and
the bare skeleton of identity that emerges as Dasein’s authentic mode of being. Without a resolution to this tension, the concept of personal ethics – or perhaps any ethics – based on personal authenticity remains highly dubious.

These problems are not new, but nor are they necessarily intractable. There have been several attempts to resolve them within the language and spirit of Heidegger’s ontology. Most begin with a self-conscious acknowledgement of Heidegger’s participation in National Socialism and an explicit disclaimer about the study being an attempt to vindicate the full breadth of Heidegger’s thought, and not the man himself. Most proceed by offering close readings of *Being and Time* and suggesting interpretations of authenticity which, like their colleagues from the camp of intersubjective authenticity, creatively appropriate ideas or assumptions not directly stated in the text. Vogel’s *The Fragile ’We’* and Olafson’s *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics* are exemplary of this trend.¹⁷

Vogel divides his work into three readings of *Being and Time*, referred to as the existentialist, the historicist, and the cosmopolitan readings, all of which he calls “plausible” but not equally likely (7). He ends up endorsing the third one as the most compatible with an ethics of authenticity, but admits that Heidegger’s intention is probably best approximated by the second.¹⁸

On the first reading, Dasein is almost entirely self-creating, a radically free individual who accepts no counsel from the unreflective customs of the they. This image of Dasein reflects Heidegger’s early claim that communal morality is de facto inauthentic. Further

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¹⁷ Ian Macdonald argues that authenticity has a normative element, but not necessarily that authentic Dasein is moral. He argues that “[t]he possibilities [Dasein] seizes on are therefore precisely those for which it ought to be, and so the call of conscience or the self-appraisal of something being needful, is also the impetus to actualize what ought to be” (Macdonald 15). Zuidervaart persuasively refutes this argument (*Authentication* 31).

¹⁸ “I claim that only the cosmopolitan interpretation is able to defend fundamental ontology against the charge of moral nihilism. Yet I admit that the cosmopolitan reading does not faithfully represent Heidegger’s intentions and, furthermore, requires a supplementation of his analysis in several respects” (Vogel 7).
evidence for this reading of Dasein is found in Division II, where the road to authenticity is described as an increasingly anti-social individual journey, culminating in Dasein’s own determination of its ownmost possibilities. As Vogel points out, this conception of Dasein as immune to tradition and universals “invites the worry that the authentic individual, like Nietzsche’s Übermensch, stands ‘beyond good and evil’” (29). The second interpretation – familiar from Division I – is supposed to rectify this by recalling Heidegger’s emphasis on heritage and thrownness. Dasein is entrenched in historically and socially relevant influences that contribute substantially to the understanding of good and bad, self and others. Hence “the past provides the content or substance that allows Dasein to escape the arbitrariness of rootless resolve” (Vogel 51). Instead of positioning Dasein ‘beyond good and evil,’ historicality is supposed to locate Dasein within a community that checks its moral subjectivism (Vogel 50). But as Vogel quickly discovers, the subjectivism he fears is inherent in both the existentialist and historicist interpretations: if it is not the free-floating individual who arbitrarily invents values ex nihilo, it is the culture to which she belongs that merely dictates its values to each of its members.¹⁹ Authentic Dasein, if it is to have any viable ethical system, must find a way of negotiating these morally unstable options. Vogel’s final interpretation – the “cosmopolitan” interpretation – is supposed to strike a balance. He argues that the seed of interpersonal ethics is already contained within Heidegger’s notion of authenticity. When Dasein is authentic, he maintains, it should recognize the potential for authenticity in others and lend them the same respect that makes its own authenticity possible. This outlook enables an ethical way of being-in-the-world, which stems from and reinforces authenticity. The cosmopolitan interpretation finds support

¹⁹ Vogel calls this “provincialism” (65).
in Heidegger’s idea of ‘liberating solicitude’ (Fürsorge), “an orientation toward others ‘made possible by’ an authentic self-relation” (Vogel 71).

Olafson makes a similar argument. Following the mandatory condemnation of the ‘ethics’ practiced by Heidegger in his lifetime, Olafson picks up a theme we saw earlier, the connection between authenticity and Mitsein. The latter concept is developed in Division I of Being and Time – primarily as the background to inauthenticity – but then appears to lose prominence as Heidegger proceeds to develop the concept of authenticity. Olafson argues that a plausible account of authenticity as ethics can be retrieved by pursuing the thread of Mitsein and expanding Heidegger’s account of being-with-others to include a certain ethical awareness. He claims that “given the fact of Mitsein, none of us can claim to be simply ignorant of or oblivious to the fact that things ‘matter’ to others just as they do to us” (Olafson 52). Like Vogel, Olafson bolsters these claims by appealing to Heidegger’s notion of Fürsorge, which supposedly builds certain intersubjective obligations directly into the analytic of Dasein.

Olafson acknowledges that his interpretation pushes the limits of what we can reasonably impute to Heidegger, both given the letter of the text and in light of other things we know about the philosopher. And while he claims that the understanding of Mitsein in his work is faithful to Heidegger’s account in Being and Time, his argument for a derivative ethics depends on contributions offered by such other philosophers as Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Indeed, although Olafson is “deeply convinced that [the ideas in Being and Time] need not lead to nihilism, as they have been almost universally supposed to do,” (6) ethics was clearly far from Heidegger’s mind: “although Heidegger developed the concept of Mitsein, neither that concept nor its ethical implications can be said to have been at the center
of his thought about being as such . . . The idea that reciprocal presence involves a kind of recognition that is implicitly ethical is simply not to be found in his work” (97).

The attempts of Vogel, Olafson, and others to salvage an ethics out of Heidegger’s authenticity are not misinformed; they have not ignored the thrust of Heidegger’s project in Being and Time. Nor is it the case that Heidegger’s ontology necessarily precludes such endeavours. But there is something telling in the fact that interpreters have been obliged, in order to make a case for Heidegger’s ethics, to extrapolate information about authenticity and Dasein that are not substantiated by his formal analysis. Vogel argues that once Dasein has correctly balanced its communitarian and solipsistic tendencies, it will recognize that its own potentiality-of-being-a-whole is bound up with the same capacity in others, and will limit its own possibilities accordingly. This move ensures that Dasein’s authenticity does not lapse into ethical antirealism: “If an affirmation of one’s own freedom involves an obligation to affirm the freedom of others, then authenticity cannot imply that everything is permitted” (Vogel 68). Likewise Olafson presupposes that “the recognition of another human being as complementary to one’s own being is prior to the definition of . . . substantive rules of conduct” (10). The difficulty with these interpretations is that they impute to Dasein certain primordial, enduring, normative characteristics that condition its approach to being-with-others – a leap that I find unjustified.20

The three objections I outlined above still stand insofar as no contemporary reading of Being and Time can produce the ontic details or ontological clarifications that Heidegger himself neglected to provide. Vogel makes the important point that reasons are a precondition for choice having any value, but he seems unconcerned about Heidegger’s

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20 They also proceed on the assumption that Dasein can be understood as a rational agent. To this extent they are vulnerable to the same criticism I brought against the arguments of Anton and Hatab.
reticence on the value or rationale behind Dasein’s choices. He covers over this omission in Being and Time by reading an ethics of desire directly into the concept of authenticity: “Being authentic is important if it allows us to appreciate the most desirable alternatives; for if it only lets us see that no one possibility is really more desirable than any others, why prefer lucidity to bad faith?” (Vogel 34). Vogel’s reasoning is persuasive, but Heidegger himself never suggests that he would endorse it. Similarly, the argument that Dasein’s authentic sense of self yields ethical choices can only be defended by assuming things that Heidegger leaves conspicuously unsaid. Lawrence Hatab, for instance, claims that “[w]e already are shaped by ethics, before we reflect on it. Given a situated, socialized self, we are ethically thrown” (57). Forgetting that Heidegger insists on the separation of ontology and ethics, Hatab’s view – an interesting and intuitive one in a different context – tries to shoehorn into Being and Time what the ethical reader merely wishes were already there.

A noteworthy study that diverges from this trend argues for Heideggerian ethics specifically by dismissing the ethical potential of authenticity, and insisting that only the later Heidegger provides the foundations for a moral system. Michael Lewis runs against the grain of the Second Wave by arguing that the ontological difference (the difference between being and beings) is the place of ethics, not authenticity as such. Interestingly, he shares the intuition of Vogel, Olafson, and Anton that ethics depends on Mitsein or being-with-others, but he differs on their connection to authenticity: being-with, according to Lewis, “is the element that above all refuses to fit into the two-part schema of authenticity and inauthenticity” (16). He proposes instead a “four-part” schema that differentiates between the “actual” events of birth and death and the “existential responses” to these events, which can be either authentic or inauthentic (Lewis 16). His reframing of basic categories in Being
and Time allows Lewis to identify the developments that were needed in Heidegger’s later thought, “a thought of being with beings, of the very differentiation of the ontological difference which went unthought in his early work” (2). Without commenting on Heidegger’s later thought, my account is consistent with Lewis’s findings: the view of authenticity expounded in Being and Time does not lead to any meaningful ethics.

ii. Freedom as the First Value

There can be no doubt that Sartre took ethics seriously both in his philosophy and in his personal political commitments; but whether his contributions amount to a consistent ethical theory, and whether they emanate from or contradict his account of authenticity cannot be settled by any facile summary. Sartre is unequivocal about the place of values and ethics in phenomenological ontology. He maintains that “my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value” (Being and Nothingness 76) and that “[o]ntology itself cannot formulate ethical precepts” (Being and Nothingness 795). So it is arguably hypocritical for Sartre, who denies the existence of objective values and codes of conduct, to either present authenticity as a normative requirement or bad faith as an ethically deficient mode of being. In fact, since authenticity is presented, as we have observed, as a desirable state of affairs, there is a logical worry that Sartre’s discussion of authenticity has already been undermined before it begins. Assessments of Sartre’s account of authenticity with respect to ethics usually address two interrelated questions: whether Sartre can consistently champion authenticity without betraying his own conception of value, and whether authenticity leads us to behave morally.

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21 Thomas Anderson argues that Sartre’s ethical thinking unfolded in several stages, none of which was ever completed. Although the first might be described as an ethics of authenticity, Anderson argues that Sartre himself revised this view several times.
On the first point, Linda Bell argues that Sartre is in fact viably positioned to criticize bad faith and endorse authenticity without violating his own ethical skepticism, much as he insists in *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Because Sartre describes bad faith as a form of self-deception in which an individual wilfully accepts one reality while ignoring another, Bell succeeds in describing bad faith as a logical error. The individual in bad faith may be charged with inconsistency rather than merely ignorance because of the “total translucency of consciousness,” which says that consciousness is always consciousness of itself (Bell 33). In this respect, as Bell argues, “bad faith is a matter of forming contradictory concepts,” or knowingly endorsing a paradox (39). Without rejecting contradiction as a moral failing, then, we can say that freedom “does not give one license to break the rules of logic” (Bell 57).

That the person in bad faith is engaged in inconsistency is easy enough to grant, but the transition from this indictment to a moral one is less seamless. Bell argues that Sartre is justified in attaching a moral judgment to the person in bad faith on the grounds that “freedom is the foundation of all values” (49). In making any choice, we must at the same time recognize the freedom that allows us to choose anything at all. Radical freedom entails limitless choice, but in bad faith the choice is to pretend that no other choice is possible and hence to deny this cardinal pre-requisite for any future values. Bell argues that bad faith precludes an individual’s declaration of any further values because she negates the foundational one – freedom – and that this move is itself deserving of condemnation.

This argument captures Sartre’s connection between the choice of freedom and the choice of other values, but we still have not been given any reason to accept that taking refuge from one’s freedom in bad faith is wrong, in a sense that is not value-neutral. If a
person is in total consciousness – as, by definition, everyone is, according to Sartre – then she should presumably be able to choose to limit her choices, even to eschew all further values, if she so desires. Sartre may provide powerful reasons for wanting to avoid this scenario, but he appears to be in no position to condemn it. This is especially true since Sartre is himself a mere human creator of subjective values, and not a harbinger of objective truths. How, then, could Sartre – or any individual – support a moral judgment of others without abandoning the precepts of existentialism?

Critics have charged Sartre with attempting to defend his condemnation of bad faith by appeal to a Kantian categorical imperative, something on the order of “Will your freedom,” an especially damaging objection given Sartre’s rejection of the logic of Kantian ethics. Bell replies, along with Hazel Barnes, that the imperative invoked here is hypothetical rather than categorical: the injunction is not, “Will your freedom,” but rather, “In order to will anything, you must first will your freedom” (52-53). Sartre endorses Kant’s ethics only insofar as he accepts that willing the ends requires willing the means. Bell goes on to claim that the acceptance of the hypothetical imperative gives rise to specifically moral judgments:

Freely choosing values while rejecting one’s freedom warrants the moral condemnation of those who freely choose their values and who also will the means – their own freedom – regardless of the values chosen. To choose one’s own values is to will the means – freedom; thus those who try to choose values without willing their freedom can be condemned, on their own grounds, by a hypothetical imperative of which they claim to accept the specified end but without willing the means. . . .

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22 Bell makes this point too, while noting that “[Sartre] did not present [his moral judgment] as merely reflecting his own choice of values, and few if any of his critics have interpreted it that way” (50).
Bell’s analysis is convincing on one level: she is correct that Sartre’s strongest injunction takes the form of a hypothetical, rather than a categorical, imperative. Yet for precisely this reason Sartre’s formula has not yet crossed into the familiar moral domain of ethical norms. One who fails to respect the logical implication of a hypothetical imperative has lapsed into a type of intellectual carelessness, and certainly might suffer for it; but the hypothetical imperative can best be understood as offering practical advice rather than moral rules. It is still unclear why, on Bell’s view, “those who freely choose their values and who also will the means” are in a position to hold in contempt those who attempt to do the former without the latter.

Although Sartre concentrates specifically on what is wrong with bad faith, and not the virtue of authenticity itself, this debate over Sartre’s right to pass moral judgment on individuals in bad faith directly parallels the issue of authenticity’s value as such. If bad faith is morally dubious, and authenticity constitutes the recovery of being from bad faith, then the latter necessarily emerges as a moral tonic. Bell is but one of numerous scholars who have defended Sartre’s view of the ethical value of authenticity, and I take her argument to be illustrative. The error in the argument is not the conclusion that bad faith is inferior to authenticity, or even, necessarily, that authenticity is a normative ideal; the difficulty is rather that Sartre (and by extension his interpreters) is not, by his own lights, in any position to make such a determination. In Existentialism and Humanism, Sartre addresses the question of passing judgment on those in bad faith: “One may object: ‘But why should he not choose
to deceive himself?’ I reply that it is not for me to judge him morally, but I define his self-deception as an error. Here one cannot avoid pronouncing a judgment of truth” (51).

Ronald Santoni also argues that Sartre’s authenticity has an inescapably moral character, but he does so without relying on the technical application of the hypothetical imperative, and his conclusions are more modest than Bell’s. As we saw in Chapter 2, Santoni meticulously separates out Sartre’s concept of authenticity from both that of bad faith and good faith to argue that authenticity requires a “radical conversion” (a change in one’s fundamental project) with respect to ‘corrupted’ being” (112). Moreover, this orientation, as distinct from all types of faith, is fundamentally reflective or self-evaluative: as he says, “[i]n reflecting on the meaning of my acts, I face the freedom of confirming my project or of altering it” (Santoni 120). Because he has already characterized authenticity as a conscientious, self-directed project, Santoni has shown the connection between authenticity and value more clearly than Bell. This is still far from being a proof of the value of authenticity as such, but Santoni explains how judgments of value are brought to bear on the self who is engaged in the conversion to authenticity. He continues:

my movement from a ‘natural attitude’ of flight . . . to a willed acceptance and self-affirmation of my freedom and responsibility – to authentic self-recovery – constitutes a moral conversion. To put the matter somewhat differently, the ‘effort at authenticity’ is a moral effort; the reflective adoption of one’s freedom as one’s own is a moral choice; ‘self-recovery’ is the moralization of human reality; authenticity (or inauthenticity) is, for Sartre, a moral category. (Santoni 109)

Santoni’s account claims that authenticity, or choosing freedom, requires a confrontation with one’s own values, and such a process can only be described as moral – not
intersubjectively morally, necessarily, but moral insofar as it engages with questions of value. Authenticity is a wilful “conversion”; it requires “effort.” By renouncing all “faith” and examining her choices in complete lucidity, the individual who commits to authenticity makes an ethical choice about her life. The individual who has faced up to her burden of freedom but nonetheless defers to bad faith has also made an ethical choice; she has devalued her freedom. One need not, then, appeal to ethical norms to appreciate the ethics of authenticity or inauthenticity in Sartre; the person who toys with a conversion to authenticity supplies the values herself.

Bell and Santoni are correct that bad faith lacks value and that authenticity is an ethical enterprise if “ethics” is defined broadly as “bringing value into the world.” But it remains the case that Sartre has no room to condemn another’s choice of inauthenticity on moral grounds. Enlightened individuals such as Sartre and Bell, who have chosen freedom as their guiding value, may recognize the nihilism of my choice, but they may not judge me ethically for it. Only if the ability to create value (namely, by willing freedom) had been shown to have intrinsic value would my renunciation of this ability count as an ethical blunder.23

I conclude, therefore, that Sartre is unable to issue moral judgments on the value of authenticity to any individual or to humanity as a whole. He is in a better position than Heidegger to comment on the value of authenticity and the disvalue of inauthenticity, but his ultimate condemnation of the inauthentic person is limited to the logical incoherence of bad faith. He is not poised to instruct others to become authentic.

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23 In fact I think there is excellent reason to believe that the value-making capacity of humans has inherent value and it would be straightforward to argue for this. But I do not take Sartre, much less Bell or Santoni, to have done so. To say that humans are the only source of value in the world is not to say that humans, or their capacity for making value, are inherently valuable. I haven’t violated any ethical norms, then, by failing to maximize this particular capacity.
The second worry about the ethics of Sartrean authenticity is that its foundation in radical freedom means that authentic behaviour is somehow immune to ethical critique, much like Heidegger’s authenticity, which can say nothing about which actions are right or wrong. If I can (indeed, must) choose my own values, then what is to prevent me from choosing the oppression of others for my own advancement as a lifelong goal? Again, as in Heidegger, unethical actions might turn out to be simultaneously laudable as authentic ones, and this result is both counter-intuitive and unpalatable.

Some types of moral offences are precluded by Sartre’s ontology because of the structure of freedom in his account. He claims that willing one’s own freedom logically entails willing the freedom of others, and this guards against treating others in any way that encroaches on their freedom. So authenticity in fact entails certain ethical precepts derived from ontology and pure logic. Although the picture presented in Being and Nothingness does little on its own to support such a view, Boileau, Anderson, Bell, and others find ample evidence for Sartre’s ethical concerns in Notebooks for an Ethics, Critique of Dialectical Reason, The War Diaries, and Existentialism and Humanism. Here Sartre tries to express the positive consequences of authenticity for the freedom of others. Yet, as far as he goes, neglecting to choose one’s freedom as a value for oneself is at most a personal problem; it is not a problem for the world, or for other moral agents. My inauthenticity seems not to encroach on the freedom or moral space of others.

24 Unlike the Kantian imperative to treat others as ends in themselves, the Sartrean injunction to respect the freedom of others derives from self-regarding motives: I cannot will my own freedom at the same time as I undermine the freedom others through whom my projects acquire meaning and the possibility of future endorsement after my death. If I were indifferent to my own freedom, i.e. in bad faith, I might have no motivation, by Sartre’s lights, to respect the freedom of others. However, as seen in our earlier analysis of bad faith, Sartre thinks that being-for-itself is never actually indifferent to its freedom, despite efforts to escape it.
Beauvoir’s ontology has more resources for explaining the connection between authenticity and morality, as well as inauthenticity and oppression. Like Sartre, she claims that authenticity cannot be purely self-regarding because willing my freedom entails willing the existence of others who can likewise exercise their freedom: “To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations” (71). However, her analysis of the types of bad faith shows that failing to will my own freedom also often results in abusing the freedom of others and vice versa. Like the Lord in Hegel’s dialectic, whose actions fail to prove his freedom as long as the Bondsman is enslaved, the oppressive person in Beauvoir’s view necessarily fails to be authentic. It is no coincidence that those in bad faith are frequently villains, since authenticity would lead them to respect others: “if the oppressor were aware of the demands of his own freedom, he himself should have to denounce oppression. But he is dishonest” (Beauvoir 96).

Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s account of authenticity thus may be linked to particular ethical constraints, but they are still far from being theories of ethics that provide substantive guidance in our behaviour. As Matthew Kieran notes, “[t]he point of ethics is to articulate and thereby guide our actions toward what should be chosen. But the existentialism of those like Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus hardly guides our actions at all. We are provided with a formal side-constraint: choose authentically” (63). Kieran is exactly right: even if authenticity is itself valuable, and even if it includes a built-in logical requirement to respect the freedom of others, it remains a structural framework that is moot on questions of practical reason or ethical dilemmas. The kinds of moral injunctions provided by familiar substantive theories of ethics are by definition incompatible with an ontology according to which radical freedom is the essence of being human. Within existential freedom, everything is permitted.
VI. Taylor’s Horizons of Significance

Thus far I have been summarizing trends in the Second Wave of Authenticity, referring to numerous interpreters of Heidegger and Sartre as exemplars of certain ideas. There are other movements in the Second Wave, too, which do not necessarily rely on scholarly critiques of past thinkers to leverage their views on the coherence or value of authenticity. As I showed in Chapter 1, the popularity of authenticity has sparked political, philosophical, and psychological discussion that transcends the way the ideal was first addressed in the early twentieth century. One contribution to this literature, however, deserves special attention, and provides a fitting conclusion to my investigations in this chapter.

Charles Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity* in a certain sense exemplifies the phenomenon I have been discussing: the work unapologetically reintroduces for philosophical analysis a concept that had been dragged through academic ridicule while being elevated to popular panacea, aiming to salvage it in the ethical tradition. At the same time, however, Taylor remains highly critical of many forms of authenticity, and, far from defending Heidegger or Sartre’s version, leaves them out of his analysis entirely. The work is primarily historical: *The Ethics of Authenticity* provides a moral argument by unravelling a kind of genealogy of its topic, especially as it has been experienced as a political and cultural ideal. It is not quite correct to categorize Taylor’s contribution to the Second Wave of authenticity along with the numerous re-interpretations of existentialist thinkers and applications of authenticity to other areas of philosophical inquiry. His work is indicative of what is at stake in some of these efforts, yet stands on its own.
As he makes clear in the introductory chapter, authenticity for Taylor is a defining ideal of modernity, and to decipher it requires more than simple-minded acceptance or rejection – attitudes that characterize what he calls the “boosters” and the “knockers” of modernity (Ethics 11). Rather, he says, “[t]he picture I am offering is . . . that of an ideal that has degraded but that is very worthwhile in itself, and indeed, I would like to say, unrepudiable by moderns” (Taylor, Ethics 23). His endeavour requires the reader to accept that “authenticity is a valid ideal” and that “you can argue in reason about ideals and the conformity of practices to these ideals” (Taylor, Ethics 23). To the extent that these premises have justified the ethics of authenticity prior to any analysis, Taylor is emblematic of the culture he scrutinizes, and different from Heidegger’s critics, who problematize the very possibility of any connection between ethics and authenticity. But Taylor’s point is simply that the meaning of authenticity should explain its value, and many “boosters” of modern authenticity have ascribed to it an incorrect meaning and therefore the wrong value. Taylor has latched on to the now familiar intuition that authenticity, when done right, is a good thing.

Authenticity today is done wrong, according to Taylor, because of its roots in a culture of individualism that prioritizes personal whimsy over ethical obligations to others. Its origins are far from unethical, however. The rise of the value of the individual as a political concern paved the way for important developments such as women’s rights, the breakdown of oppressive hierarchies, and greater social equality; and it introduced the contemporary notion that the individual is a microcosm of humanity with independent value and significance. This progression naturally yields the belief that there is something special about my life simply because it is mine. Taylor explains:
Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own ‘measure’ is his way of putting it. This idea has entered very deep into modern consciousness. It is also new. Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me. (Ethics 28-9)

Authenticity so conceived sounds profoundly humanistic and self-affirming. The trouble with our modern orientation, Taylor explains, is our propensity to interpret the call of selfhood as a solipsistic project through which the humanity of others is ignored. Hence what we need to explain is what is peculiar to our time. It’s not just that people sacrifice their love relationships, and the care of their children, to pursue their careers. Something like this has perhaps always existed. The point is that today many people feel called to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn’t do it. (Taylor, Ethics 17)

The value of discovering “what being human is for me” has thus been supplanted by the putative value of pursuing my own ends at any cost. This ill-conceived interpretation dilutes the value of genuine authenticity, and occasions what Taylor calls a “slide to subjectivism” (Ethics 55). Rather than providing a humanistic, unifying value to which all individuals can aspire, the culture of authenticity promotes an overly tolerant brand of relativism that justifies unethical behaviour by exalting individual self-determination.
The culture of authenticity also undermines the demands of ethics by pitting authenticity against conformity, including conformity to moral expectations. As Taylor convincingly argues, authenticity is usually associated with originality or creativity – hence our image of the artist as a trailblazer of authenticity – and considered anathema to social convention and accepted mores (Ethics 62). While he affirms that authenticity should involve a measure of self-definition or creativity, Taylor warns that this aspect of the ideal should not be confused with a mandatory rejection of ethical culture. Originality that rebels against moral wisdom is merely unethical, not authentic.

For Taylor, the remedy to the vacuous authenticity espoused today is to reclaim what he calls “horizons of significance” (Ethics 35). These are projects or values that transcend the self, but nonetheless contribute to self-fulfillment and actualization. They need not be the same for everyone, but for everyone there must be something that establishes a connection between individual fulfillment and something of significance in the world:

Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (Taylor, Ethics 40-41)

Here Taylor echoes the interpretation that I have called “intersubjective authenticity,” and also addresses one of my criticisms of Heidegger and Sartre by attempting to fill in the concept of authenticity with recognizable content. He intimates through his examples that the content must be something large or weighty, but since it is also open to interpretation, his definition might be overly inclusive. What is clear is that a self-regarding way of being need
not be constituted by a series of self-regarding concerns. He explains: “Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be my orientation. But this doesn’t mean that on another level the content must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfill my desires or aspirations, as against something that stands beyond these” (Taylor, Ethics 82). Authenticity collapses when the form and substance are regarded as interchangeable: “[t]o confuse these two kinds of self-referentiality is catastrophic” (Taylor, Ethics 82).

Taylor’s “horizons of significance” signal an important departure from much of the tradition of authenticity he has hitherto defended, particularly existentialism. While he affirms that authenticity consists in enriching the significance of my unique life, he denies that the individual is herself the locus of this significance. By importing other “horizons” into the structure of individual identity – he lists as examples “God, or a political cause, or tending the earth”– Taylor erodes the assumption that significance starts and ends with the individual (Ethics 82). This establishes a marked contrast to the views of Heidegger and Sartre, for whom, even if authenticity is compatible with what others deem to be moral, value is strictly a result of individual creation. Taylor lambastes the view that “things have significance not of themselves but because people deem them to have it – as though people could determine what is significant, either by decision, or perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly by just feeling that way. This is crazy” (Ethics 36).

Note that Taylor’s argument here extends beyond the claims of both proponents of intersubjective authenticity and standard accounts of the ethics of authenticity. He is not merely claiming that individual authenticity is compatible with, or even constituted by, the interests and goals of others; his claim is stronger. Taylor is suggesting that the types of judgments that underwrite authentic behaviour cannot, as elsewhere thought, be derived from
a kind of private consultation with the self. Horizons of significance are “true, discovered, not decided. Horizons are given” (Ethics 39). ‘True’ in this context is to be understood, not as the self-validating truths about personal identity that are common in authenticity talk, but as truths with intersubjective recognizability and perhaps transcendent justification.

By redefining the type of truth that is thought to be honoured in authentic behaviour, Taylor also effects a Euthyphro-esque reversal of the meaning of choice in authenticity. Whereas for the existentialists, x was valuable because I chose it, for Taylor, I should only choose x because it is already valuable. We have seen how choice functions as one of the central measures of authenticity for Heidegger and Sartre, because authentic being must confront and will its own freedom. We have also seen how the endorsement of choice for its own sake arouses skepticism about the value of what is chosen. Like other critics, Taylor rejects the view that “[a]ll options are equally worthy, because they are freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth,” (Ethics 37) since it “implicitly denies the existence of a pre-existing horizon of significance, whereby some things are worthwhile and others less so, and still others not at all, quite anterior to choice” (Ethics 38).

Taylor does not spell out exactly what counts as a ‘horizon of significance,’ that is to say, what contains intrinsic value anterior to choice and hence what the authentic person might regard as choiceworthy. This raises the question of whether the values he is declaring to be objective are actually separable from those one might come across spontaneously. His discussion of epiphanies in Source of the Self compounds this conflation: “Realizing an epiphany is a paradigm case of what I call recovering contact with a moral source . . . the contact either fosters and/or itself constitutes a spiritually significant fulfillment or wholeness” (Taylor 425). Epiphanies are by definition subjective, unverifiable experiences,
and horizons of significance, like “moral sources,” are notional rather than concrete. If, as one commentator says, “[t]he notion of epiphany identifies those independent sources, which serve as the locus for one’s authentic ideal,” then Taylor’s conception of authenticity appeals to moral sources outside the self while simultaneously licensing the individual to determine what counts as a moral source (Braman 76). This in itself looks suspiciously like the soft relativism Taylor criticizes.

Moreover, one wonders whether Taylor, rather than suggesting the convergence point of ethics and authenticity, is not merely reducing the latter to the former. If authenticity depends upon the recognition of something external to the self with intrinsic value, then regardless of how such a thing is determined, how is being authentic substantively different from adhering to a particular ethical system? Is it possible to be ethical without being authentic, or vice versa? Taylor’s pluralism with respect to eligible horizons of significance (e.g. “God, or a political cause, or tending the earth” [Ethics 82]) defers but does not diffuse this concern. I must not value exactly the same things that everyone else values, but presumably something about what I value must nonetheless be expressive of me, and must further my own pursuit of authentic selfhood. Taylor has announced that an individual cannot achieve authenticity without being ethical, but he also has not identified, beyond being ethical, what makes an individual authentic.

Taylor’s authenticity attempts to correct a significant pitfall in the way authenticity is usually understood. He averts the problem of authenticity becoming a solipsistic pursuit because, unlike the other interpreters surveyed in this chapter, he unhinges authenticity from its Heideggerian or Sartrean roots as well as from the culture of self-interest which has overtaken it. It is important, if we are to reinvigorate the concept of authenticity, to move
beyond the existentialist account and search for something concrete to grasp onto. For Taylor this takes the form of horizons of significance. This suggestion certainly helps to show how authenticity can be constitutive of an ethical life, but it still fails to add concreteness to the question of “what being human is for me” (Taylor, Ethics 29). With Taylor’s contributions, we are closer to understanding authenticity as an ethical ideal, but without an explanation of how I come to choose certain ethical ideals and not others, this insight does not further our comprehension of the truth that authenticity reveals about myself.

In order to see how authenticity can be a meaningful indicator of who I am and how I ought to live my life, we need to consider more closely what informs our understanding of selfhood and identity. In addition, in order to rescue authenticity from pure formalism, we need to consider particular choices and how they relate to our individual identity. In the next two chapters I tackle the concept of authenticity through considerations of practical reason, character, and sincerity.
CHAPTER 5
ACT AND CHARACTER

In this chapter I discuss authenticity with respect to specific actions and trends of actions, as well as the motives behind them, which ultimately contribute to what we call character. I am interested here in the temporal extension of personal identity and how we can judge whether someone is authentic when so much of our behaviour and motives are subject to change. I begin by considering Parfit’s Desire-Fulfillment Theory as an analog of authenticity and nuance it with the help of Frankfurt’s concept of wholeheartedness. Next I talk about the worry that authenticity is temporally biased and hence irrational. I examine whether temporal bias or neutrality is demanded by authenticity and, if so, whether this is a fault. This discussion bridges an important concept in the work of Paul Ricoeur, narrative identity, which accounts for change and the temporal aspects of selfhood. From there I move to a consideration of character as the essential part of a person’s identity and ask whether it can provide a foundation for understanding authenticity as being true to oneself. I conclude that character in Ricoeur’s sense is a part of what we mean when we refer to authenticity, but as he points out, the structure of character is versatile and dialectical, which makes the self with which authentic behaviour is supposed to converge into a perpetually moving target.

I. Coffee, Tea, or Me?

There is debate over what aspect or aspects of selfhood can be described as “authentic.” Are we talking about a trend of behaviour, a lifelong project, or a particular decision? Can I judge my degree of authenticity on the basis of individual episodes, or must
I look holistically at an extended period in my life? The existentialist conception of authenticity hinges on innumerable moments of choice, but remains silent about how these choices are made. In an attempt to redress this, I will begin by considering the micro-level of authenticity: the authenticity of a particular choice. Inevitably this evaluation will appeal to larger issues of personality along the lifespan, but we will tackle those in due time.

The practical reason literature of the last several decades concerns itself generally with two related questions: how it is rational to act and how it is moral to act. For the moment I am concerned with what has been said about the content of acting rationally and whether it can be instructive as to the content of authentic action. Derek Parfit maps the major theories about rationality in Reasons and Persons. Many of them, he believes, are branches of the theory he calls the self-interest theory, or S. According to S in its simplest form, “[f]or each person, there is one supremely rational ultimate aim: that his life go, for him, as well as possible” (Parfit 4). Narrower theories attempt to fill in the content of what it means for life to go “as well as possible.” Parfit focuses on three of these: Hedonistic Theory, the Desire-Fulfillment Theory, and the Objective List Theory. On HT, what would make my life go best is what would make me happiest. On DFT, what would make my life go best is fulfilling as many of my desires as possible. On OLT, what would make my life go best is a set of objective goods, which would have to be spelled out by a further theory. Although these are theories of how to be rational and not how to be authentic, Parfit’s suggested theories also propose answers to questions that have recurred throughout this inquiry: what parts of myself should I heed in my actions? Which beliefs or desires are most indicative of who I am? What kind of person ought I to be?

1 Frankfurt also stresses the link between decision-making and selfhood: “Since it is most conspicuously by making a decision that a person identifies with some element of his psychic life, deciding plays an important role in the formation and maintenance of the self” (Identity 172).
I think it is clear that hedonism is not convergent with authenticity. While it is true that being authentic might well make us happy, there is no a priori reason to suppose that if we are happy, we are also authentic. Doing what makes us happy may translate into being our true selves; but it is also easy to imagine that what makes us happy in one moment constitutes some departure from our true selves, perhaps because easy, simple pleasures make us happy, whereas difficult, more sophisticated goals better describe who we really are.

The OLT is unlikely to converge with authenticity because it purports to be universal, providing a list of what everyone ought to pursue, regardless of his or her identity. The OLT may indicate the kinds of goods that humans should pursue, but the contents of the OLT – whoever decides them – are too general to answer the question of what it means to be true to oneself.

The DFT is more promising. It is not implausible to suppose that fulfilling our desires is authentic, and that being authentic somehow involves fulfilling our desires. This is because our desires “feel right” to us; they seem to give information about who we are. It is worth investigating whether being true to our desires is equivalent to being true to ourselves, that is, authentic.

II. Authenticity and the Fulfillment of Desires

If what we are being true to when we are authentic is simply what feels right to us, then authenticity might look something like a desire-fulfillment theory of practical reason. And, like many theories of practical reason, authenticity could accommodate stronger or more abstract desires at the expense of weaker or more immediate ones, so that it would not lapse into a validation of any and all immediate instincts: eating the chocolate cake right
before dinner could be trumped by my desire to save room for a healthy meal. This interpretation of authenticity is plausible because, after all, my desires seem to speak as much as anything to the content of my self, to which I strive to be true. Correctly identifying and then following through on our strongest desires is one possible formula for authenticity. Does it stand up to scrutiny?

Let us look at the converse possibility: the non-fulfillment of desires. Surely this must count as inauthentic. If I can clearly identify some powerful desire of mine, which is not in conflict with any other desire or ideal I hold, and I choose not to fulfill it, then surely I am being untrue to myself. The only explanation for such self-denial would be some form of external coercion or manipulation. This would mean that the reason I do not fulfill the desire comes from outside, not within, myself. So it seems that even if desire fulfillment is not the crux of authenticity, authenticity should at least include the fulfillment of those desires about which I experience no internal conflict.

This conception of desire-fulfillment is consistent with many popular renderings of authenticity, particularly as it has come to be understood in the last two or three decades. The culture of “finding yourself” by following your strongest desires, even when it means eschewing convention and responsibility, has gained traction in an era marked by individualism and the glorification of personal fulfillment. When a woman leaves her husband, citing a stronger pull toward exploring the world or “herself” than to staying in a conflict-ridden relationship, she may invoke authenticity. When a young adult leaves school or an uninspiring job to follow his dreams or pursue transient desires, his move might be lauded on the basis of its authenticity. These types of justifications are increasingly common and accepted on the grounds that “what feels right” is somehow a litmus test of ethical

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2 Here we are concerned specifically with desires that might lead to action – in other words, motives.
rectitude. In general there has been a trend in Western culture toward recognizing the
gratification of individual desires as an intrinsic goal, and this often goes by the name of
“authenticity,” as innumerable self-help guides and other cultural artifacts attest.

The movement toward self-fulfillment and the gratification of all desires has also
drawn considerable criticism. Unchecked desire fulfillment often entails the renunciation of
other values and responsibilities, as both the above examples show. This consequence of this
so-called authenticity has led many philosophers and cultural critics to dismiss the ideal as
little more than narcissism or immoral hedonism. Taylor is concerned that defining
authenticity in strictly personal terms removes the moral requirements that should be
associated with such an ideal, and invites unbridled relativism and egotism. His solution of
appealing to “horizons of significance” in turn seems to be a version of OLT. Desire-
fulfillment is not irrelevant to authenticity on Taylor’s account, but only certain types of
desires, correctly fulfilled, lend themselves to an authentic way of life.

Taylor’s critique points out an important flaw in DFT, but as previously argued, his
alternative proposal removes the essential question of identity from the meaning of
authenticity. We should reject authenticity that is defined purely in terms of satisfying
individual desires, regardless of the motives for those desires or the consequences of their
fulfillment. However, if authenticity is to retain any meaning, it should be able to explain
what is most true about an individual before it can explain why it is valuable to act in
accordance with that truth. Neither the selfish gratification of immediate desires nor the
dedication of oneself to a “horizon of significance” constitutes such an explanation.

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3 See, for example, Lasch 285-289.
III. A Specification of Desire Fulfillment: Frankfurt’s Wholeheartedness

Another reason we might critique an account of authenticity that reduces to immediate desire fulfillment is that it naively assumes that desires are isolated, unambiguous occurrences in an individual’s life. This watered-down account of authenticity implies that if I feel like quitting my job and traveling the world on a camel, I can with no psychological turmoil proceed to hand in my resignation and fulfill that desire. In fact, the fulfillment of desires is far from being a straightforward issue, mainly because it is rare for our desires not to conflict with any other desire or ideal we hold. In his essay “Identity and Wholeheartedness,” Harry Frankfurt applies this stringent test of consistency to the analysis of a desire or motive for action: “in virtue of the fact that we do not unequivocally endorse or support our own motive, it can appropriately be said that what we want . . . is in a certain ordinary sense not something we really want” (163). This conclusion leads Frankfurt to consider the conflict between desires that may account for inauthenticity, and to ask how it is possible to achieve non-conflicting desires.

Frankfurt identifies several types of desires and motives, which are worth clarifying before analyzing his argument. He designates the desire that actually leads to action as the will. In addition to this “effective” desire, we may have numerous other desires that do not ultimately get acted upon, but are still of the first order. Further, he says, “people characteristically have second-order desires concerning what first-order desires they want, and they have second-order volitions concerning which first-order desire they want to be their will. There may also be desires and volitions of higher orders” (Frankfurt, Identity 164). The conflict that interests Frankfurt most – the one that admits of the presence or

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4 “Whichever of these first-order desires actually leads to action is, by virtue of that effectiveness, designated the will of the individual whose desire it is” (Frankfurt, Identity 163).
absence of what he calls “wholeheartedness” – is that between our second-order volitions concerning our will. He takes as fairly straightforward the case of a smoker who wants to quit: this person experiences a conflict between his will (the effective desire to have a cigarette) and his higher-order desire to repudiate his will and replace it with another one. Frankfurt would say that this individual knows what he “really” wants but is unable, for whatever chemical or psychological reasons, to implement it.

Now we might believe that the smoker has inconsistent desires and therefore experiences ambivalence or even inauthenticity. But Frankfurt limits his discussion of these questions to a different kind of inconsistency within one’s desire structure. What happens when we don’t actually know what we want, in the sense of not being able to decide what we want to be our will? He poses this question in terms of the absence or presence of identification with one’s motives. The smoker identifies with the higher-order volition to refuse a cigarette, and in that respect is clear about what he wants. But sometimes we cannot say for certain which potential will we most identify with.

It is crucial to remark that Frankfurt’s concern with identification has higher stakes than just the metaphysical clarity it seeks to achieve. According to Frankfurt, we “constitute ourselves” by identifying with certain volitions and not others (Identity 170). To act upon those volitions with which we identify is therefore an act of fidelity to the self we have decided to be. Moreover, Frankfurt believes that our will has certain essential contents, without which we would cease to be ourselves. Although he does not use the vocabulary of

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5 Frankfurt explains how desires might be arbitrary but the decision to constitute ourselves as identifying with some of them can be deliberate: “even if the person is not responsible for the fact that the desire occurs, there is an important sense in which he takes responsibility for the fact of having the desire. . . when he identifies himself with it” (Identity 170). I shall leave aside the discussion of where our desires come from and whether we can indeed choose to experience them as our own.

6 See David Velleman’s comment in “Identification and Identity,” 332-338.
authenticity, Frankfurt is here addressing the same concerns about what it means to be “true to oneself.” Wholeheartedness is the condition of thoroughly identifying with one’s first order desire or motive as well as all the higher-order ones implied by it, so that the resulting action can be said to issue from a single, harmonious self. This in turn provides a new criterion for desire: “[s]omeone does what he really wants to do only when he acts in accordance with a pertinent higher-order volition. But this condition could not be sufficient unless the higher-order volition were itself one by which the person really wanted to be determined” (Frankfurt, Identity 166). The consistency of the will expressed in wholeheartedness evokes the “true self” sought after in authenticity. The lack of wholeheartedness is obviously akin to a state of inauthenticity, as Frankfurt confirms: “In the absence of wholeheartedness, the person is not merely in conflict with forces ‘outside him’; rather, he himself is divided” (Identity 165).

To be divided in this sense has none of the mystique of existential descriptions of fallenness or bad faith. When I have mixed feelings of both attraction and repulsion to a person, when I deliberately procrastinate about doing something that I want to do, or when I voluntarily undertake an action that I know I will regret, I could be said to be half-hearted or ambivalent. Frankfurt hence puts his finger on a prevalent and familiar problem. He also makes use of the intuition that we do not want to be this way; we value and prefer what he describes as wholeheartedness, because it represents a lack of uncomfortable psychological conflict and confusion about how to act. Wholeheartedness does not require absolute consistency among our desires, but only that we identify with one consistent set of desires that we want to be our will, and expel others from our “self.” Much as we expect from an account of authenticity, Frankfurt endorses acting on what is essential to the self as opposed
to what is foreign, contingent, or superficial. Wholeheartedness has the same logic and lure as authenticity.

As David Velleman argues, however, the fact that such an ideal is attractive does not entail that it achieves what we want it to. He shows that “identification” can have numerous meanings – not always positive – and that dissociating oneself from certain desires can have deleterious effects, because it promotes greater division rather than greater harmony. His well-chosen illustration is Freud’s patient, the “Rat Man,” so called because of his perverse obsession with rats. The cause of this patient’s neurosis was determined to be his repressed hatred of his father. He eagerly identified with his love for his father, constituting himself, as Frankfurt might say, as a devoted son. The hatred nonetheless persisted, manifesting itself in frustratingly contradictory behaviour, such as “repeatedly doing and undoing an action” (Velleman 343). The man clearly experienced confusion about what he wanted to be his will, but forced consistency upon his psychological state by admitting only to his feelings of love. Freud helped to expose the patient’s unacknowledged feelings so that he could take ownership of them; when he did, the obsessional neurotic behaviour subsided (Freud, Case Histories 57). Velleman concludes that “[w]hat made [the Rat Man] ill was his effort to dissociate himself from one of his emotions, which is just what Frankfurt prescribes for cases of ambivalence” (344).

Velleman’s counterexample shows that we should reject wholeheartedness, if not as an explanation of psychological conflict, then at least as an ideal way to solve (or, as it were, repress) it. It is true that we identify with some of our desires and not others, but when we formalize this division, “we thereby engage not in self-definition but self-deception”
The effect of wholeheartedness might then turn out to be inauthenticity rather than its opposite.

Velleman’s critique of Frankfurt is vivid, although I suspect he exaggerates somewhat Frankfurt’s intention in distinguishing between desires we identify with and those from which we prefer to dissociate ourselves. This discrimination between desires could presumably occur without pathological repression and self-punishing guilt about having the desires with which we do not ultimately identify. The Rat Man did not undergo a conscious process of assessing his various motives and choosing which ones to adopt or expel; he simply experienced enormous repression and ignorance about the contents of his own mind. Frankfurt might respond to Velleman’s counter-example by stressing the need for the discrimination to be preceded by an honest and thorough inventory of one’s motives.

In the spirit of Velleman’s analysis, though, we could ask several other questions about Frankfurt’s account of desires. How likely is it that one can achieve wholeheartedness? What does it mean to actually “identify with” something ephemeral such as a motive and how do we impose that kind of identification on ourselves? Do we really have control over our motives?

On the first point, the resonance of one desire through every higher level might be extremely rare; consequently, wholeheartedness threatens to be a forbiddingly high standard for authenticity. How often can we say that we definitively want to want to want to want . . . ad infinitum what we want, with no sympathy for (in the sense of identification with) a rival desire? Identification to this consummate degree eludes most of us most of the time. If authenticity requires Frankfurt’s wholeheartedness, then he has probably set the bar too high.
Second, we should inquire into what it means to “identify with” a motive at all. Velleman provides a useful synopsis of the usual applications of this verb, none of which seem to capture Frankfurt’s meaning. To identify with a motive cannot mean to care about its welfare, to empathize with it, or to imagine oneself in its position (Velleman 348-352). So what do we mean when we say that we really want something because we identify with the motive it gives us to act? On Frankfurt’s account, identification is described in language almost reminiscent of Heidegger: it has to do with ownership, or “mineness.” But according to Frankfurt, these motives are not intrinsically or equally mine; they need to be adopted as such. However, it is unclear why a person would stipulate that some motive should be adopted and another should not:

The decision determines what the person really wants by making the desire on which he decides fully his own. To this extent the person, in making a decision by which he identifies with a desire, constitutes himself. The pertinent desire is no longer in any way external to him . . . It comes to be a desire that is incorporated into him by virtue of the fact that he has it by his own will. (Frankfurt, Identity 170)

Frankfurt cannot explain why a person decides to make one desire “fully his own” – he just does. The process of discrimination between desires is opaque. The definition of identification therefore appears to cause a regress: how do I come to identify with the motive to identify with one of my motives and not others? Presumably it is on the basis of other values I hold concerning which motives it is good to identify with. But this seems to be an arbitrary criterion, not deliberately chosen as Frankfurt describes.

The Rat Man case history suggests how a person might evaluate his motives and choose which to adopt as his own. The patient clearly had feelings of pride, propriety, and
self-approval with respect to the motive he “identified with” – filial love. By contrast, the feeling that he sought to repress – hatred for his father – was met with shame, guilt, and self-castigation; he had trouble even admitting it to his psychoanalyst. So in Frankfurt’s sense, the Rat Man wanted to “constitute himself” as a loving son because of his value set, and was terrified of constituting himself as a contemptuous, even murderous, one. Thus he “identified with” the former desire and declined to identify with the latter. Had he lived in a culture with different mores, he might have experienced the reverse.

If identification is a question of assessing the desirability of certain motives and discarding the undesirable ones, it does not supply us with a satisfying measure of personal authenticity. While it may be true that we identify with those motives that we value or respect, this fact does not seem to render those motives more essential to ourselves than other motives, equally present in our psyches, of which we are ashamed. Behaving consistently with one set of motives only because it is more praiseworthy or socially acceptable than another set seems like a betrayal of the true self, not a reflection of it. But how can we strictly separate desires that are conditioned by our society and those that we would have anyway?

Parfit provides a strategy for making this distinction. Speaking again of what it is rational to do, he offers a variation on DFT, called “deliberative present-aim theory” (Parfit 118). On DP,

[w]hat each of us has most reason to do is what would best achieve, not what he actually wants, but what he would want, at the time of acting, if he had undergone a process of ‘ideal deliberation’ – if he knew the relevant facts, was thinking clearly, and was free from distorting influences. (Parfit 118)
Parfit’s formula speaks to the intuition that our ambivalent desires could be effectively disentangled from each other if we possessed the relevant information, time, and rationality to disentangle them. The condition that Frankfurt describes as ambivalence might persist only as long as we neglect to deliberate appropriately about these half-hearted desires, or perhaps only as long as we are free to remain so divided. We could say that the content of what we “really” want or identify with is what we say we want “when push comes to shove.”

Parfit rejects DP as a theory of what it is rational to do because, even after careful deliberation, one could endorse acting upon a heinous or downright irrational desire: “Suppose that, knowing the facts and thinking clearly, I prefer the world’s destruction to the scratching of my finger. On the Deliberative Theory, if I had a Doomsday Machine, and could act upon this preference, it would be rational to do so” (Parfit 118). In asking whether DP provides a criterion for acting authentically, however, we may be indifferent to its rational or moral status. It could be that these post-deliberative desires are what Frankfurt means (or should mean) when he talks about identification. We identify most with those desires that survive careful scrutiny and exposure to new information. If the Rat Man were free from “distorting influences” such as society’s staunch disapproval of hating one’s father, and if he knew all the implications of his desires, he might finally be able to say honestly which feeling he identified with the most: love or hate. If he could not, then we would have good reason to conclude that his will was resistant to wholeheartedness. Wholeheartedness may not always be achievable, and perhaps neither is authenticity. Hence DP is a compelling explanation of what it means to identify with certain motives and not others, as well as how

7 If, “when push comes to shove,” we remain unable to declare what we really want, then we might be fundamentally or incorrigibly ambivalent; authenticity is not possible in this case.
to gauge the absence of any identification. Nonetheless, it merely defers the question of whether identification is indeed the important thing to look for: are the motives with which we identify the core of our identity as selves? Is this the grail of self-truthfulness that we have been seeking?

Frankfurt’s work is salutary to a constructive account of authenticity because it expresses the goal of being true to oneself in terms of practical reason: it helps us figure out what, in order to be authentic, we ought to do from moment to moment. It suggests that what we count as authenticity is at least partly coincident with some version of Desire-Fulfillment Theory, according to which the thing we most wholeheartedly desire is the thing that we most want. To the extent that our desires and motives are constitutive of the self, it makes sense that authentic choices would reflect the strongest among those. But this is not enough to explain what we mean by authenticity. Even putting aside the thorny problems, raised by Velleman among others, of how to identify those desires and what to do with the rest of them, there seems to be more to authenticity than doing what we really want. Our desires at a given moment in time, even if they are somehow mutually coherent, might yet be inconsistent with our desires at other times, or with other features of the self that we have yet to discuss.

IV. Temporal Bias or Neutrality

If authenticity tracks the essence of selfhood, and that essence is determined by desires or motives, then authenticity lacks temporal subtlety: desires and motives, like most aspects of our personalities, change over time. Authenticity appears to imply consistency or
even stagnancy, but selfhood involves amendment and development. Sartre noticed this apparent contradiction:

If we start from the in-itself, the appearance of change can indeed constitute a problem; if the in-itself is what it is, how can it no longer be so? But if on the contrary, we proceed from an adequate comprehension of the for-itself, it is no longer change which needs explaining but rather permanence. (Being and Nothingness 208-209)

The combination of permanence and change presents a challenge for philosophers of authenticity. If people are constantly changing, how can we say who they really are? Yet if we are infinitely open-ended and free, why talk about authenticity or essentialism at all? Rousseau also commented on this conundrum: “L’on a remarqué que la plus part des hommes sont dans le cours de leur vie souvent dissemblables à eux-mêmes et semblent se transformer en des hommes tout différents [sic]” (Oeuvres Complètes IX, 408). To say that a person fails or ceases to resemble himself is to assert simultaneously that there is a perduring self we can attribute to this person and that any such attribution might have to be renounced without warning. This makes it extremely difficult to establish at any moment who one is.

Because of this, we have to decide how to reconcile or prioritize authenticity and temporality. David Brink has observed that one of the well-known sins of practical reason, temporal bias, might be implicit in the definition of authenticity. In making this assertion he is assuming an account of authenticity that resembles the present-centered theory of desire fulfillment we have just examined – specifically, the view of authenticity as “conforming to principles one accepts at the time of action” (Brink 222). If being authentic means doing

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8 “It has often been noticed that in the course of their lives the majority of men are quite unlike themselves, and often seem to transform themselves into totally different men” (Berman’s translation; Berman 71).
what feels right or what I most want to do now, then authenticity seems to require a trade-off with what Brink calls “prudence,” also known as temporal neutrality in our calculations about our own lives. He raises the concern that temporal neutrality demands “sacrificing a nearer good for a later, greater good,” which appears to be inauthentic to the self at the time of action (Brink 221). Brink resolves the apparent conflict by redefining authenticity away from its presentist focus: “[t]o be true to herself, since she is a temporally extended person, [an individual] must be true to all of her reasonable ideals and cannot be selectively attentive to her current ideals” (Brink 239). Hence he reconciles the desirable but apparently mutually exclusive virtues of authenticity and prudence by claiming that “authenticity – understood as being true to oneself – actually supports temporal neutrality” (Brink 215).

Brink’s postulation of a potential conflict between authenticity and temporal neutrality raises important questions about the self as a temporally extended agent and how this impacts our understanding of authenticity. The difficulty arises from the intuitive understanding of authentic action as being present-focused and rationality as being temporally neutral. Brink’s assumption presents a strong challenge to the view of authenticity based on desire theory or wholeheartedness: even if it is my desires or principles that I must heed in order to be authentic, these things change over time, begging the question of which temporal slice of personal ideals takes priority. How can I be authentic over a lifetime if the contents of my “true self” are in flux? If the answer is to heed the principles I feel most strongly at the time of action, then authenticity might be so temporally biased toward the present as to appear unimportant; but if authenticity demands adherence to ideals that I expect to have in the future, or demands that I act only upon those desires that
are compatible with all my other conceivable desires over time, then it becomes so unspecific as to be meaningless.

I find Brink’s analysis of this tension to be inadequate in several ways, but his unconvincing solution only reinforces the tenacity of the problem. He advocates acting on one’s current ideals, as authenticity seems to demand, but doing so in such a way as to keep open the option of acting on different ideals in the future. He says that “I can no more act on ideals that I do not have now, but will have later, than I can act on someone else’s ideals,”

but that in acting on my present ideals, “the content of these can incorporate the demands of temporal neutrality” by leaving room for those unknown future ideals (Brink 233-34). This strikes me as vague as well as overly ambitious. We cannot act on immediate ideals while simultaneously endorsing contradictory ideals that we might later develop – even if that is what authenticity would theoretically demand.

Fortunately, I do not think that this schizophrenic view of the lifespan is what authenticity in fact entails. Authenticity does not require prophesying every conceivable disposition we might have in the future and attempting to honour it preemptively. The content of authenticity for a particular person may vary over his lifespan. Nonetheless, authenticity may come into conflict with change over time in many ways. Whether the “true self” we ought to be faithful to is defined in terms of desires, ideals, motives, or beliefs, all of these undergo some alteration over the course of a normal lifespan. How temporally biased should authenticity be, and where should that bias lie?

9 Notice that he is effectively calling inauthenticity psychologically impossible.

10 We can still understand our present principles as ones that are liable to undergo some change. As Williams says, “if it is true that [a] man will change in these ways, it is only by understanding his present projects as the projects of one who will so change that he can understand them even as his present projects” (Moral Luck 10, original emphasis).
Brink appears to be most concerned with intrapersonal conflicts of value between the present and the future. Paul Ricoeur also raises the concern that doing what we feel most strongly about now might be inconsistent with our future dispositions and consequently, in Brink’s terminology, inauthentic. He distinguishes between two aspects of personal identity using the Latin adjectives ipse and idem. The former means something like mine, myself: it reinforces the obvious identity relation between a thing and itself. Who cleaned the kitchen? Ego ipse – “I myself.” Ipseity refers to “selfhood,” the content of the identity that we hold, but not necessarily essentialism: “identity in the sense of ipse implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality” (Ricoeur 2). The latter term, idem, means something like “the same”. Sameness reflects the view of personal identity that Ricoeur thinks governs the analytic tradition: identity as numerical identity, re-identification of the same, extreme resemblance, uninterrupted continuity or permanence in time (Ricoeur 116-118). These two axes of personal identity – selfhood and sameness – are not equivalent, although they may frequently overlap. A paradigm case of the disparity between ipse and idem can be seen in the example of making a promise that we do not want to keep. Promise-keeping binds us to sameness in our actions: what I said I would do last week is what I must do next week. But our actual dispositions can change. That I keep my promises despite having a different desire when it comes time to deliver on them is a testament to the resilience of ipseity. Hence, Ricoeur says, gesturing at authenticity, that “faithfulness to oneself in keeping one’s word marks the extreme gap between the permanence of the self

11 German Selbstheit, French ipséité.
12 “same” (même) is used in the context of comparison; its contraries are ‘other,’ ‘contrary,’ ‘distinct,’ ‘diverse,’ ‘unequal,’ ‘inverse’” (Ricoeur 2-3).
13 German Gleichheit, French mêmeté.
14 “keeping one’s promise . . . does indeed appear to stand as a challenge to time, a denial of change: even if my desire were to change, even if I were to change my opinion or my inclination, ‘I will hold firm.’ . . . It is here, precisely, that selfhood and sameness cease to coincide” (Ricoeur 124).
[ipse] and that of the same [idem] and attests fully to the irreducibility of the two problematics one to the other” (118). Ricoeur wants to argue that selfhood persists over time despite changes in psychological dispositions, behaviours, and attitudes. Nonetheless, the self is not reducible to the Kantian “schema of the category of substance” – that is, it cannot be simply reified and then ossified in time (Ricoeur 118).

We may recast Ricoeur’s example of the challenge of the self-evolution in terms of Brink’s dichotomy between authenticity and temporal neutrality. If I am called upon to deliver on a promise I made last year but no longer feel inclined to uphold, to which temporal “self” do I owe my fidelity? Is it authentic to honour the self that made the promise, or the self that no longer wants to keep it? This is an over-simplification of Ricoeur’s hypothesis about the poles of identity, but it helps to bring into focus the tension that Brink attempted to diffuse. Whichever self seems to command more fidelity, authenticity will be temporally biased. Even if this is not a sin in itself, it requires justification: why should I be true to one part of myself at the expense of another? Is it possible to reconcile these options?

V. Narrative Unity

For Ricoeur, a reconciliation of sorts is to be found in the proper view of personal identity as fundamentally narrative. While distinct moments in a life may appear to be incompatible, they contribute to the arc that makes human lives resemble stories. Unity can be recognized amid the discrete moments with this holistic viewpoint. This perspective suits our purposes admirably: authenticity inevitably has something to do with unity because both
attempt to track something constant and definitive about a person. Both of them can in principle admit of change and variation while stressing an underlying continuity.  

What do we mean by “unity” in a life? To a certain extent the assessment of unity is trivial: if I am (pace Parfit) the same person throughout my life, there will be unity in what I do by definition. As Arthur Danto wrote, “[t]here is unity in a man’s life if only in the sense that we cannot think of a life as other than unified” (25). And Charles Taylor echoes his intuition as follows: “there is something like a priori unity of a human life through its whole extent” (Taylor, Sources 51). If unity is to prove a useful tool for assessing one’s life, it will have to be enriched beyond this trivial definition.

The narrative criterion of personal identity gives us a bar for deciding whether some part of a person’s life is integral or not to her identity. The narrative criterion says that “what makes an action, experience, or psychological characteristic properly attributable to some person (and thus a proper part of his or her true identity) is its correct incorporation into the self-told story of his or her life” (Shoemaker). Needless to say, what count as “correct incorporation” and “self-told story” are subject to interpretation.

The term “narrative unity” or “narrativity” is illustrative because, in reading fiction, we take for granted the author’s intention of telling a complete story in which each part has its place. No event in a well-written story may be dismissed as a superfluous inclusion. If Hamlet had scaled Mount Everest in the unwritten scene II.iii of Shakespeare’s masterpiece, literary scholars would interpret Hamlet’s mountain climbing in light of his other beliefs, values and pursuits, and correspondingly adjust their holistic assessment of the Dane’s

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15 For Ricoeur, this unity need not take the form of a life-long project or meta-goal the way it does for Hurka and MacIntyre.
16 Ricoeur talks about narrativity or narrative identity, while the term ‘narrative unity’ is used by MacIntyre, among others. It is not clear that they are identical, but for the purposes of this discussion I am only interested in the common idea.
character in light of his lesser-known hobby. The activity would still participate in the unity of all activities attributed to the character, simply by virtue of being a feat whose subject was Hamlet, however inconcomitant with his better-known habits of fencing, ruminating, and delivering soliloquies. Real lives are no different. Upon learning about some aspect of a friend’s life that comes as a surprise, we do not treat the new information as evidence of split personality disorder or botched scriptwriting. Instead we create explanations\(^\text{17}\) that unify the different elements of the person’s life, and we use these explanations to better understand the elements in terms of one another. Ricoeur calls this *emplotment*, as Bernard Dauenhauer explains:

> all the elements that a narrative unites are contingencies. All of them could have been different or even nonexistent. Nonetheless, as emplotted, these elements take on the guise of necessity or at least of likelihood. Taken by itself, an element of a story is of interest only if it is surprising. But when it is integrated into a plot it appears as a quasi-necessity. (Dauenhauer)

So rather than dismissing as aberrational the fact that my conservative friend used to live on a commune and smoke large quantities of hashish, I reinterpret my pre-existing knowledge in light of the new information to create one consistent story. I do not say that the commune-dweller and the conservative are two different people. Instead I assume that both versions of my friend can be truly attributed to his self, even if they are temporally constrained.

Moreover, I explain his current incarnation in part as a result of his previous one: I assume that something has remained permanent throughout the changes, propelling him from one stage in life to another.

\(^{17}\) MacIntyre prefers the term “narrative histories” to my term “explanations” (197).
A narrative view of the lifespan clearly helps to answer the challenge to authenticity presented by change in the self over time, but perhaps it goes too far. The criterion threatens to be overly inclusive. It seems to suggest that all of a person’s actions and dispositions belong properly to his self, regardless of how inconsistent they might be, as long as some kind of story can be told to link them together. It is difficult to imagine a scenario in which no such explanation could be produced. Hence the criterion might be equivalent to saying that every act is by definition an act of fidelity to the self in some sense, and as such cannot be construed as inauthentic. It could be seen as an extreme version of temporal neutrality, whereby every part of me is de facto authentic because of its participation in lifelong identity. Is the concept of narrativity helpful for understanding authenticity, or does it simply invalidate the discussion?

VI. Tangled up in Blue

One way to approach this is to ask whether, on a narrative account of personal identity, one’s life could be genuinely dis-unified or lack all narrative continuity. As an example, we need a reference point of a paradigmatically chaotic life. Consider the career of the venerable folk singer Bob Dylan, whose albums have evolved from simple acoustic anti-war ballads through musings on the electric guitar and bluesy stylings on the harmonica to fundamentalist Christian, and then orthodox Jewish, spirituals. Dylan fans might be inclined to think of the singer’s unpredictable meanderings through musical styles and ideologies as proof of his profound talent, without being the least bit disturbed by the disunity between his albums, and sometimes even the tracks on a given album. But most people would not be content to conclude that his life is fundamentally dis-unified – that is, that these phases
simply do not belong in the same human life. Superficially there are of course numerous
resemblances between the phases of Dylan’s career, which in some trivial sense point to the
higher-order unity of his pursuits: he has always been a singer and songwriter; he almost
always performs solo; his melodies are generally simple and his lyrics poetic; his voice is
unmistakable; and so on. But using these similarities to argue for the unity of Dylan’s career
seems to be missing the point. As far as musicians go, Dylan remains one of the most
erratic, his career one of the most diverse. Indeed, for fans who have followed Dylan
devotedly since the early 1960s, the insistence on unity could be said to undermine the very
achievement that makes Dylan the recipient of their praise.

The question for philosophers concerned with authenticity is whether all these
disparate phases of Dylan’s career are properly part of himself, that is, reflective of his real
identity, or whether one or more of them is anomalous. The narrative criterion of personal
identity would hold that each stage is part of his identity, as long as we can relate them
narratively. But it is possible that, notwithstanding what a good story-teller could make of
his life, Dylan has been authentic at certain points and inauthentic at others. It all depends on
how the script is read.

Allow me therefore to briefly indulge in imagining some possible explanations for
Dylan’s highly erratic behaviour. He may have genuinely become enamoured by each of the
styles he delved into, sincerely convinced of each successive political or religious belief set,and artistically inspired at each juncture to create the particular kind of music he created.
One may be skeptical of such flightiness – is he overly impressionable? attention-
challenged? – but it could plausibly explain the changes he has undergone. On the other
hand, Dylan may have been deliberately experimental, throwing himself into novel and
perhaps uncomfortable milieus for some purpose that is invisible to us, and attempting to make the most of each. His frequent “self re-invention” might then be viewed as authentic if we regard such experiences as identity-defining, as opposed to fake or inauthentic. Then again, perhaps the overarching motivation for all the changes was not personal expression, but something less commendable – marketability, for instance. In this case there is a narrative to be threaded through the decades, but it is a narrative that unites all the stages of his life into a single identity only insofar as that identity is marked by performance and dissimulation.

There are countless more possibilities, which would in some way account for radical change in a life and fit the criterion of incorporation into a narrative. The notion of narrative unity alone is insufficient for gauging which parts of a chaotic life, if any, properly belong to the person’s identity, and which, if any, do not; consequently it does not help to answer our earlier question of how to reconcile divergent expressions of the self throughout time. At the very least, it is insufficient when applied by an outsider – in fairness, the definition refers to “the self-told story” of one’s life. Perhaps Dylan could decide for himself, in an honest retrospective, which bits of his life were consistent with who he “really” is. But the definition also calls for the “correct incorporation” (my emphasis) of experiences into a self-told narrative, and the appeal to correctness suggests that one could provide correct or incorrect narratives about one’s own life. I wonder whether something as creative and subjective as autobiographical story-telling could really yield something “correct”.

As Brink and Ricoeur have already pointed out, change over time is a fact of selfhood, and one that a theory of authenticity must wrestle with. As Taylor puts it, “[m]y self-understanding necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative” (Sources 50).
We expect lives to admit of varying degrees of consistency or unity, and authenticity should in some way account for this variance without resorting to lopsided temporal bias or temporal neutrality. Confronted with a case like that of Bob Dylan, we see that any simple judgment is too facile. Whether Dylan’s life can be rendered into a coherent narrative depends on how much change is admissible within narrativity, as well as what kind of change it is, and any stipulations on these matters would have to be ad hoc. We need much more information about Dylan’s motives, his experiences, and the nature of selfhood in general to issue a judgment on this – and this returns us to a familiar impasse. What is ultimately most true or most essential about a person’s identity?

VII. Character and Personality

We have already considered the possibility that what is most true about or indicative of a person’s real identity at a particular time is some version of her desires. We saw earlier why Desire-Fulfillment Theory does not make for a sufficient account of authentic action. We are now in a position to consider aspects of identity over time that might explain that with which authentic behaviour is supposed to converge. Obviously the true self is a moving target when we are inconsistent, but what about when we are consistent? It would be helpful to identify aspects of the self that do not change over time and therefore do not need to be effortfully glued together by a narrative or some other scaffolding. Then we might say that they constitute at least a part of the essential self that authenticity asks us to heed.

In contrast to the mismatch between ipse and idem represented by promise-keeping, Ricoeur posits character as the overlap of the two axes on a temporal spectrum. By “character” in this context we mean neither the virtue of integrity (“he’s a man of great
character”), nor a personality brimming with amusing idiosyncrasies (“he’s a real character”), nor a fictional person (in literature, Ricoeur believes, “character” and “identity” coincide). Instead, for Ricoeur, “[character] designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognized. In this way character is able to constitute the limit point where the problematic of ipse becomes indiscernible from that of idem” (121). He continues: “precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, ipse; but this ipse announces itself as idem” (Ricoeur 121).

Notwithstanding the fact that everyone changes in some ways, it can be generally agreed that most people have certain characteristic personality traits that remain more or less constant. Jane is characteristically shy and soft-spoken; Cindy is known for being opinionated and outgoing; Brock is irreverent and has a dry sense of humour. Putting aside Sartre’s argument that identity traits are vacuous labels that mistakenly conflate a person’s future with her past, these types of descriptions are generally thought to be meaningful and can often be corroborated by different people. There is an intuitive connection between such character traits and authenticity. When we come to recognize a person’s character, we say that we “know” her; or as Ricoeur puts it, we know “the set of distinctive marks which permit the re-identification of a human individual as being the same” (119). How do we decide what those distinctive marks are in each case?

A hypothetical example will help to flesh out this topic. Imagine that Jane has been shy all her life and that her typical party behaviour involves sitting quietly on a couch and listening politely while others talk. We can say that it is in her character to be a wallflower. This is what she feels comfortable doing, but she berates herself for not making more of an

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18 Ricoeur 141.
19 When I speak of “character” in this context, I am not differentiating it from “personality.”
effort to socialize. One evening she is going to a party and decides to make a conscious, if artificial, effort to initiate conversation with new people and participate more in the conversations around her. Although she feels awkward, this strategy is successful: Jane makes the acquaintance of several new people whom she would not have otherwise met, and even leaves the party with a couple of phone numbers of prospective new friends.

Is Jane’s behavior authentic? In other words, which part of herself is truer or more essential: the wallflower that comes naturally, or the girl who must force herself to make new friends? If character is given the veto, then the answer is the former. But there are reasons for thinking that consistency with her past character is not Jane’s only, or even most, authentic option in this case.

If character is defined as dominant dispositions over time, then we would say that Jane’s behaviour is “out of character” and possibly even inauthentic. Yet, as Ricoeur wisely emphasizes, “[s]elfhood . . . is not sameness” (116). Much of the interest in human action would be lost if everyone mindlessly replicated what some pre-established character predicted they would do. Character implies some degree of consistency over time, but as a component of selfhood, it also demands flexibility. To simply assert that “Jane is a wallflower” seems unnecessarily reductive and deterministic. We would not necessarily applaud Jane’s behaviour if she never strayed from her shy party posture, simply on the basis that she was honouring her “character.” There has to be more to the value of character than mere consistency, especially if that consistency is fuelled by fear of the unknown or of personal growth. So there is an argument for saying that it is not necessarily authentic for Jane to “remain in character” – but nor is it thereby authentic for her to break out of it. We would need to know more about Jane.

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20 I leave aside for now the question of what determines character.
In fact, some would say that there might be a value to breaking out of character for its own sake, and that this deliberate discomfort or experimentation is what really constitutes selfhood. Heidegger and Sartre are ambiguous on this point, since they decline to weigh in on what makes particular actions more authentic than others, but post-structuralists such as Foucault have championed placing oneself in “boundary situations” where the content of selfhood is challenged. Foucault explicitly repudiates authenticity and advocates the opposite of self-identity: “the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation” (Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity in Ethics 166). Because he views the subject as being determined by juridical powers that ultimately affect our own self-definition, Foucault believes that estranging ourselves from our usual identities is integral to the practice of freedom and the development of the self. Rather than replicating behaviours that are familiar and widely sanctioned, Foucault endorses experimentation; for example, he argues that “we have to experience drugs” and that “S&M is . . . the real creation of new possibilities for pleasure” (Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity in Ethics 165).21 Such acts of transgression serve to erode the artificial limits of selfhood and personal identity. It is only through acting out of the norm that normative limits can be identified and broken down: “a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (Foucault, A Preface to Transgression in Aesthetics 73).

21 Foucault also believes that incest should be re-examined because, like homosexual urges, incestuous desires were the arbitrary victims of the repressive law against non-procreative sexual behaviour. He says: “the great interdiction of incest is an invention of the intellectuals” (Sexual Choice, Sexual Act in Ethics 154). For Foucault, almost any transgression is legitimate, particularly when it comes to sex, except for rape (on this point see Butler 143).
Foucault’s prescription for subjectivity mirrors the structure of authenticity as set out by the existentialists – authenticity as self-creation and openness rather than discovery and essentialism – but it is more directive about how to bring it about. On this view, it would be much more valuable for Jane to force herself into the uncomfortable situation of being socially adventurous, even if the experiment were a failure and she never attempted it again. In a school of thought that seeks to destabilize the notion of selfhood as permanence over time, distancing oneself from past behaviours and facile instincts is itself an exercise in being oneself.

On the other hand, it is more logical to think of Jane’s normal behaviour as authentic and her abnormal behaviour as inauthentic, for on what other basis could we judge who she is? If Jane has proven time and time again that she feels most comfortable being taciturn in social situations, then adherence to that track record must count for something. But in order to know what it counts for, we must know what motivated her to act that way in the past. She may have been acting on her strongest desire, or out of psychological compulsion. But maybe she was acting that way for arbitrary reasons, or out of coercion, in which case perhaps Jane’s past doesn’t tell us much about her character at all. This is where the term “character” might prove to be frustratingly empty. If a behaviour or disposition can be changed, as Jane’s can, then it loses the metaphysical necessity of an essential trait. Those dispositions that have been consistent in the past then might tell us little or nothing about a person’s identity – or, while they might speak to the past, Sartre is right that they cannot predict the future. “Character” suggests that isolated incidents are more than the sum of their parts; it gestures at that obscure Kantian “substratum” of which Ricoeur declared suspicion (118).
Suppose that we can fairly describe Jane’s character, up to the point in question, as being shy in social situations. Now let us imagine a continuation of this scenario. Suppose that Jane’s new and unusual party behaviour turns out to be gratifying and she begins to repeat it. Eventually, being outgoing becomes her new normal. People no longer think of her as a wallflower, and Jane comes to feel comfortable in her new role. After this development, what is Jane’s character?22

That we have no automatic answer to this question is evidence for the persistent problem that time functions as “a factor of dissemblance, of divergence, of difference” (Ricoeur 117). Even when discussing character, which is supposed to give weight and duration to personal identity, we are faced with the possibility of change, and consequently are distanced from a single self by which we can be identified over time. Character should perhaps be understood, not as that set of traits that never change – for there are no guarantees in personal identity – but as those traits that rarely change, or that change only with great effort.23 We might describe these traits as “perduring” rather than “essential.” Repetition is not the same as permanence. Ricoeur observes this, citing the difference between habit and necessity: “habit gives a history to character, but this is a history in which sedimentation tends to cover over the innovation which preceded it” (121). Jane’s new social demeanour might eventually take on the guise of character, but it would not be an essential or lifelong aspect of her personality, because it was, after all, new and out of character at one time.

22 A transformation of this nature occurs in Nick Hornby’s novel, How To Be Good. The narrator is perplexed to find that her husband has been transformed from a sarcastic, cranky, misanthrope into a sensitive, sincere do-gooder. Rather than rejoice at his new positivity, she is troubled by the unexpected change. We must say that he underwent a thorough change of character.

23 Even with this modification, I do not think that a person’s character can be used as a direct guide to authenticity. As I said earlier, it is possible for a trait to be exemplified over time but not because of its special relationship to a person’s essence.
I am not suggesting that every part of a person’s character changes, nor that this change is usually rapid, but the mere fact that even perduring traits could eventually change indicates just how slippery the concept of character remains. For each person, there may well be aspects of their personality or behaviours that remain constant from birth to death, but there is no way of knowing at any given time which those are. This accounts for the tremendous interest of life stories, fictional narratives, and other studies in the humanities: if we were all pre-determined by an inflexible personality, following a person’s development over time would not be nearly as intriguing. For Foucault, the openness of identity gives life its meaning. He says that “[t]he main interest in life is to become someone else that you were not at the beginning . . . The game is worthwhile insofar as we don’t know what will be the end” (Technologies 286).

What we can conclude about character comes down to this: at any given time, each us of is characterized by certain enduring habits and patterns, but over time these are subject to change. In the midst of a person’s life, the attempt to identify his character is circular: that which he has done consistently in the past could be called his character for now, but changes made tomorrow might ultimately negate those descriptions, invalidating them as a criterion by which he might be “re-identified” (Ricoeur 119). As Ricoeur elegantly puts it, character amounts to “the dialectic of innovation and sedimentation, underlying the acquisition of a habit, and the equally rich dialectic of othemess and internalization, underlying the process of identification” (122). By his own account, then, it seems that Ricoeur’s initial definition of character fails: we cannot reliably re-identify someone on the

24 I return to the question of whether any part of identity is not subject to change in the next chapter.
basis of her character if the latter is constituted by unpredictable movement. He still maintains that character contains “immutable traits” but suggests no method for distinguishing these from their mutable counterparts (Ricoeur 123).

In its relationship to authenticity, then, character is both an irresistible lead and a red herring: it certainly speaks to the unique and definitive aspects of personal identity by which we come to know people over time, but depending on it as the standard-bearer of selfhood leads to contradictions. We can no more say that the true self is equivalent to one’s character than we can say that one should never change. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that acting “out of character” once in a while is integral to our development and maturation as humans.

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*Ricoeur is not trying, however, to force these observations into a succinct and universal yardstick of character or authenticity. He stresses: “I have the gravest doubt concerning the use of the term ‘criterion’ in the framework of the present discussion” (Ricoeur 129).*
CHAPTER 6
SINCERITY AND SOCIETY

In the last chapter we looked at the way that personal identity is reflected both in particular acts and in long-term dispositions that we call character. The instability of these traits, however, makes it nearly impossible to pin down which are essential as opposed to contingent, or lasting as opposed to transitory. It was assumed over the course of that discussion that these motives and behaviours by which we come to identity ourselves can arise from spontaneous internal sources. In this chapter I will continue to examine the constraints on our understanding of authenticity by considering the ways in which personal identity is shaped by external sources, and how the self-relation at stake in authenticity is affected by our relations to others.

I begin by examining how authenticity has been correlated to a rejection of society in the form of originality or madness. This is followed by an investigation of sincerity and authenticity, or the difference between representing oneself truthfully to oneself and representing oneself truthfully to others. Here I engage with Lionel Trilling’s contributions to the subject and dispute Judith Butler’s conclusion about the degree to which selfhood is a performance. Finally I return to the question of essential properties and argue, against Sartre, that for at least one – sexual orientation – there is a “true self” that persists regardless of social relations. However, this triumph has limited applicability to our understanding of authenticity with respect to other features of personal identity, which are typically not factical or determinate.
I. Divergent Roads

Referring to objects other than persons, “authentic” is sometimes used as a synonym for “original,” as in the 1950s diner that has been in business all these decades.¹ While the originality of humans in this sense is rarely questioned, we do talk about a person’s originality in the context of character appraisal and personal identity. In fact, there may be less distance between the two definitions of “original” than it appears: “she’s an original” means something like “she is unique,” just as each person is unique at the moment of her birth – her origin. We usually prize originality, just as we prize authenticity, because it identifies a person’s uniqueness. At the beginning of his Confessions, Rousseau proudly proclaims: “Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j’ai vus; j’ose croire n’être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si je ne vaud pas mieux, au moins je suis autre” (I, 5).² And Taylor argues that authenticity requires “originality, and frequently… opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality” (Ethics 66). I shall argue that originality is not a necessary component of authenticity, although they may frequently co-exist.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Heidegger’s account of authenticity in Being and Time suggests an affinity between personal authenticity and non-conformity. Dasein’s inauthenticity was explained by its being lost in the crowd – das Man – and unable to disentangle its own possibilities from those that others chose for it. By contrast, Dasein was said to be in its authentic mode when it contacted its ownmost, that is, its unique possibilities of being, separate from das Man. This process does not guarantee that the content of Dasein’s authentic choices will be different from the choices of the masses, but the process

¹ Note that we could describe the diner both as original and as authentic.
² “I am not made like anyone I’ve met; I dare say I am not made like anyone who exists. I may not be better, but at least I am different.”
of choosing will be deliberately independent. Dasein’s authentic mode of being entails being an original chooser, even if it does not guarantee original choices.

An obvious response to Heidegger’s position is that he contrasts these possibilities – independent and communal, original and conformist, authentic and inauthentic – too starkly. In reality, very few decisions are made entirely in isolation from a social group or cultural trends, from the they. Even those who appear to be stubbornly independent or non-conformist tend to slip into some degree of overlap with their surroundings in one of two ways: either because their surroundings have conditioned the very mechanism by which they evaluate and deliberate about things, or because their choice will be dogmatically opposite to whatever the crowd is choosing, so that it defines itself only by its antithesis. (If the only type of jeans in fashion are skin-tight and tapered, I will wear my jeans baggy and flared.) If we can never fully extricate ourselves from the forces that Heidegger calls das Man, then the prospects of being original are slim, and so are the chances of being authentic.

It is understandable why originality and authenticity might be viewed together: if originality means not converging with others, what else then could spur original behaviour but convergence with oneself? Presumably the different-ness of the original person does not arise arbitrarily. But the alliance between originality and authenticity just begs the question we have already encountered, namely what it means to be self-convergent. Do I act in this way because it is true to my identity, or for some other reason?

In Frost’s famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” which is usually read as a celebration of individualism and originality, the speaker implies that he took the second road precisely because it had been favoured by fewer previous travellers than had the first road. He says that it was “just as fair” (6) and had “perhaps the better claim, / Because it was
grassy and wanted wear” (7-8). He was motivated, then, by its lack of popularity (but equivalence in beauty); no other reasons are given for his choosing one road over the other. Frost’s walker concludes that this decision to be original had positive implications: “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference” (18-20).

While we might grant that Frost’s poem speaks to the value of originality (albeit abstractly), we should not conclude that the narrator is authentic because of the choice he made in the woods. Making choices in opposition to the majority simply for the sake of being different provides no more information about the identity of the person choosing than would making choices in blind conformity to others’ choices. There are no correlates in the walker’s personality to his choice of the second road; his decision is circumstantial and informed entirely (as far as we know) by social factors. Although this tells us that he is a person who likes to be original, it gives us no more insight into his identity than if he were to choose the first road and describe himself as a follower of others. Authenticity should be more tailored to a person’s individual identity than this: as we saw in Heidegger, defining inauthenticity as conformity with the they and authenticity as separation from the they still leaves open important discussion about who one is and how to be true to oneself.

Despite some superficial similarities, then, personal authenticity is not synonymous with originality, which it might be in the case of inanimate objects. Individuals who behave remarkably and stand out from the norm may do so for a variety of reasons, which may or may not indicate anything true or profound about their identity. Moreover, a person with an authentic self-relation might appear to be mainstream and “conformist” to others. It seems possible to be different from others and in a peculiar way, different from oneself. In other
words, originality is no guarantee of authenticity. This challenges the reductio that everything we do is authentic simply because it is we who do it.

A distinction must be drawn, however, between originality in the sense of idiosyncrasy or uniqueness and originality or non-conformity in the sense of steadfastness and self-assuredness. We might attribute authenticity to the person who stands out from her peers because she is committed to certain principles that her peers violate. Her authenticity is contained, not in her uniqueness or her challenge to authority per se, but rather in her unflattering convergence between self and conduct despite adversity. For instance, if Marilyn vocally opposes her company’s new alliance with a foreign company that is known to use sweatshop labour and she becomes singled out and unpopular as a result, she is true to her principles in the first instance and original only by extension. We would call her authentic, particularly if she sacrificed something valuable such as her job in order to remain “true to herself.” Her originality is thus only incidental. The phrase “sticking to your guns” applies to such a situation. The authentic person sticks to her guns, regardless of what others are doing, and often despite costly consequences for doing so. But she sticks out of a genuine conviction that forms part of her identity – not out of contrariness or a desire to be different.³

So while we must decouple authenticity and originality, we can nonetheless retain the intuition that authenticity might manifest itself as originality because the authentic person, when challenged on her unpopular beliefs, resists backing down – as long as these beliefs are part of her true self, a criterion that remains to be fleshed out.

³ It is true that this behaviour could also be described, disparagingly, as simple stubbornness. People who stick to their guns might be praised for their authenticity or criticized for their narrow-mindedness and inflexibility. This suggests that sticking to one’s guns is at best an incomplete explanation of authenticity, and could be distinguished from stubbornness by some further information.
II. Madness, Psychosis, and Intoxication

In a similar vein to originality, traits such as madness and psychosis – acting contrary to social norms and standards of reason – are sometimes seen as authentic. This is because many thinkers have regarded those influences that keep us following social norms as contrary to our most fundamental instincts and identities. Trilling observes that philosophers as diverse as Laing and Freud have all pointed to the authenticity-stripping forces of society and its various institutions on individuals (159-161). Social norms force us to behave, think, and constitute ourselves in a certain way, often contrary to our natural desires and impulses. As madness has conventionally been defined in terms of socially unacceptable beliefs or actions (the opposite of “reason”), individuals suffering from insanity, psychosis, and schizophrenia have been at times considered champions of an inner truth, defying the externally imposed artifice that the majority of us obey. On this view, Trilling notes, “insanity is a state of human existence which is to be esteemed for its commanding authenticity” (168).

That modern society could be a source of inauthenticity is easily seen in the work of Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, Rousseau, and others. All of them maintain that modern civilization represses innate human desires, particularly those regarding violence and sex, and demands an unnatural adaptation to a set of artificial rules that govern law and propriety. Some of the supposed effects of this forcible repression include neurosis, psychosis, asceticism, and masochism. Trilling finds these types of arguments highly plausible: “[w]e

4 Moreover, as literature frequently suggests, the “fool” (an irrational, socially maladroit, or mentally ill person) seems to have access to truths that befuddle other, more “rational” people. The fool in King Lear is one powerful example.
5 Seigel notes that the surrealists and “Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida saw sexual desire and madness as emblems of escape from the oppressive rigidity of everyday life” (649).
6 See e.g. Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals; Freud, Civilization and its Discontents; Foucault, Discipline and Punish.
understand a priori that the prescriptions of society pervert human existence and destroy its authenticity” (161). In the face of such high costs of conformity, one might consider the utter rejection of these rules to be a “direct and appropriate response to the coercive inauthenticity of society” (Trilling 168). If so, we might say that authenticity is only possible as, or following, a protest against the taming and constraining forces of civilization.

Freud, without talking about authenticity as such, gives voice to this position in his analysis of the psyche. His definition of the Id as the seat of desires uncontaminated by any socio-cultural factors suggests that it is the “authentic” part of the human mind. The Superego, meanwhile, is the ambassador of artificial rules and constraints imposed upon the person from outside, representing the inauthentic side of our psyche. The relevant question for authenticity is whether all inhibitions of libido come from external sources or whether the individual herself has mechanisms of repression already within her psyche. This is because the argument for the authenticity of the Id/libido hinges on the assumption of a dichotomy between nature and civilization. As I argue below, there is reason to question this definition of the true self as something that can be isolated from socio-cultural factors. Yet the notion that each person harbours a cluster of undiluted instincts – whether called the Id or something else – provides a compelling case to shun the inauthenticity of civilization and search for authenticity in the most untouched recesses of the psyche.

A similar argument is often made about the correlation between authenticity and certain intoxicants. On the same assumption that society strangles our authentic selves, one

7 The role of the Ego complicates this picture considerably. Freud argues in his later works that the ego itself has conscious and unconscious elements, and that “the ego is the true and original reservoir of libido” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle, 62).

8 Of course, for all his critique of civilization, Freud’s purpose was not to call for a return to some kind of “state of nature,” even if such a move were possible. His point was rather that in reaping the benefits of organized civilization – an inevitable development of humanity – we are required to sacrifice the ability to experience all parts of our identity without turmoil. If we are “authentic” the turmoil is external – social alienation, for instance – whereas if we are “inauthentic” the turmoil is internal, as seen in the Rat Man.
could conclude that the “liberating” power of recreational drugs, which dull one’s inhibitions and render social norms less powerful, provide special access to the unadulterated self that would reign supreme were it not for civilization’s stern impositions. Indeed, this is one of the primary attractions of alcohol: drinking a couple glasses of wine “helps me relax,” that is, to shed my inhibitions, and “be myself.” If disinhibition is a desideratum of authenticity, then we would have to say that for many people, alcohol and possibly other recreational drugs result in greater authenticity.\footnote{It is less likely that we could make this claim about more potent or mind-altering drugs, which not only help one to shed inhibitions but radically alter one’s perception of reality as well. Not coincidentally, some people who use so-called “hard” drugs say that it helps them to escape or transcend, rather than become closer to, their true selves.}

There is probably a grain of truth to the view that states of madness – whether involuntary or deliberately induced – afford a kind of perspective that may be described as “truthful” or even “authentic”. However, this discussion is very much affected by how we define authenticity. While it seems relatively uncontroversial to charge society with causing us to be “inauthentic,” insofar as it imposes norms and controls behaviour, it is less obvious that resisting this phenomenon is tantamount to “authenticity.” We have noted that “inauthenticity” is freely used to refer to artifice of any kind, but not all lack of artifice, much less all reaction to artifice, is necessarily authentic. The kind of authenticity being touted here in the fool, the madman, and the substance abuser is reminiscent of authenticity as pure desire fulfillment, not much more. Relieved of their inhibitions and their adherence to common standards of reason and propriety, these characters do as they please – they follow instincts rather than rules, impulses rather than reflective deliberation.\footnote{Another type of person who is characteristically uninhibited is a person suffering from dementia. Forgetful of many social customs and family secrets, and unaware of the impression they make on others, individuals with dementia often neglect to filter what comes into their minds, and will do whatever makes them comfortable, even if they would have previously condemned it.} As argued in the previous chapter, I am not convinced that such unchecked fulfillment of desires is sufficient...
for authenticity, although it may be a part of it. We must also be mindful, of course, of how we are interpreting “madness”; for while a person who is slightly “crazy” by cultural standards may authentically choose to be himself despite scorn or ostracization, one who suffers from chemical imbalances that result in delusion or even paranoia cannot be said to be authentic simply in virtue of his lack of self-control and regard for social norms. In this respect my conclusions about authenticity and madness parallel those I drew above about authenticity and originality: being different is not the same as being authentic.

III. Not False to Any Man

In a famous passage from *Hamlet*, Polonius gives his son Laertes the following sage piece of advice: “This above all – to thine own self be true./ And it must follow, as the night the day,/ Thou canst not then be false to any man” (*Hamlet* I.iii.78-80). Today, as in the Renaissance, truthfulness is highly valued both in self-regarding and other-regarding conduct. Self-regarding truthfulness of this kind is often described simply as authenticity, whereas other-regarding truthfulness goes by the name sincerity. What Polonius is saying, then, is that authenticity is a pre-requisite for sincerity. \(^{11}\) Four centuries of theatre-goers have nodded approvingly at his formulation. To my knowledge, however, only Lionel Trilling has subjected the related concepts of sincerity and authenticity to a philosophical examination, which he did in a 1971 lecture that was later published. Trilling is not particularly concerned with differentiating between and refining the parameters of each term, suggesting instead that they have similar meanings but prevailed in different linguistic

\(^{11}\) There are alternate interpretations of Polonius’s words: for instance, “thou canst not then be false to any man” could be intended to mean “you will be a loyal friend” or something to that effect. Being “true to oneself” is not idiomatically parallel to “being true to others.” The latter expression often pertains to norms of fidelity or emotional support rather than avoiding false representations of oneself. I thank Christine Overall for pointing this out to me.
settings. For our purposes it will be essential to ask whether sincerity and authenticity overlap, and if so, when and how.

Trilling writes that “before authenticity had come along to suggest the deficiencies of sincerity and to usurp its place in our esteem, sincerity stood high in the cultural firmament and had dominion over men’s imagination of how they ought to be” (12). He attributes the former exaltation of sincerity in Western culture to a widespread concern about “dissimulation, feigning, and pretence” in the Renaissance, citing as an example Polonius’ well-known advice to Laertes (Trilling 13). Sincerity, as Polonius conceives it, seems to boast the twin virtues of preventing falsehood in one’s dealings both with others and with oneself. As I interpret these terms, however, sincerity concerns avoiding deceiving others about oneself, whereas authenticity is judged on the absence of self-deception.** It is the latter which occupies us to a much greater extent today, and which is both more interesting and challenging philosophically. Trilling concurs that our interest in the problem of deception has evolved since the 17th Century:

The deception we best understand and most willingly give our attention to is that which a person works upon himself. Iago’s avowed purpose of base duplicity does not hold for us the fascination that nineteenth-century audiences found in it; our liveliest curiosity is likely to be directed to the moral condition of Othello, to what lies hidden under his superbness, to what in him is masked by the heroic persona. Similarly Tartuffe, who consciously and avowedly dissembles, engages us less than the protagonist of Le Misanthrope… (16)

So whereas sincerity was an urgent concern for audiences of the 16th Century, Trilling argues that we are today more preoccupied with questions of authenticity. The villains of

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12 As I show below, it is possible for the content of these enterprises to overlap.
Shakespeare and Moliere whose treachery is transparent to the audience may or may not have a truthful self-relation, but they are assuredly not sincere: they deliberately mis-portray themselves to others. The deception of others makes for engaging drama but its structure is elementary; there is no great confusion about what constitutes such insincerity. The same does not go for self-deception, or what has variously been called bad faith, inauthenticity, denial, and so on. As we have seen, the twin concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity challenge the structure of the self as a unit that is by definition self-coincident. Insincerity presents no such metaphysical challenge because we are not accustomed to thinking of the self and the impression others have of it as necessarily coincident. Regardless of whether sincerity and authenticity turn out to imply one another or be connected in some way, it is clear that authenticity is about self-relation and sincerity is about interpersonal relations.

I suggested in the previous chapter that Frankfurt’s conception of wholeheartedness might be a useful criterion for gauging authenticity. Although wholeheartedness is not completely co-extensive with authenticity, it helps to illustrate the distinction between authenticity and sincerity. Sincerity stands in no special relationship to wholeheartedness. I can be honest with others regardless of whether I am wholehearted or not. This holds true even if my only belief about myself is that I am inauthentic. This lack of wholeheartedness in no way prevents me from sincerely communicating my lack of wholeheartedness to others – unless, of course, I lack wholeheartedness specifically about the very prospect of acting sincerely. But barring this exception, sincerity clearly does not depend on wholeheartedness.

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The possibility of being an authentic liar will be discussed below. It does, however, present other metaphysical challenges, some of which I explore below.
Frankfurt’s wholeheartedness is also useful in this context because it signals other features of the authentic self-relation that can help us to distinguish it from the others-relation. It is clear, for instance, that if I am to bring all my motives into a consistent volitional set, I require at the very least a good knowledge and understanding of my motives. In other words, self-knowledge is also a requirement of authenticity as long as wholeheartedness is.\textsuperscript{15} Is such self-knowledge required for sincerity? I will explore this by means of another fictional example.

Forrest Gump exemplifies a life that is breathtakingly diverse but painfully lacking in depth because of the character’s unusually low intelligence. The character drifts through unplanned careers (shrimp-fishing, ping-pong playing, long-distance running) and historical milieus (Vietnam and the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the beginning of the AIDS epidemic) utterly oblivious to his role in history, inadvertently starting trends and effecting changes that the audience recognizes as major twentieth century cultural and political phenomena. Because of his inability to reflect on, analyze, or assimilate any of his experiences, Gump literally floats through phases of life that are burgeoning with historical and psychological significance and fails to draw any instructive connections between them. He is unable to understand his motives and hence incapable of identifying with or repudiating any of them as Frankfurt requires. This function is completed by the audience.\textsuperscript{16}

We can say that Gump lacks self-knowledge, but not that he lacks sincerity. Indeed, his charm is contained in this vulnerable combination of self-ignorance and utter truthfulness in his dealings with others. Gump answers questions as honestly and forthrightly as possible

\textsuperscript{15} Although we are still in the process of exploring what is meant by the “self,” I take the term “self-knowledge” to be applicable to Frankfurt. One can have knowledge (i.e. awareness) of his or her motives and desires, regardless of whether these belong to an entity we can identify by other characteristics – that is, regardless of whether there is a stable subject that owns the motives.

\textsuperscript{16} Ricoeur calls this “narrative intelligence” (143 fn).
(often with embarrassing results); he is utterly transparent. Gump announces no commitment to the ideal of sincerity – even this would exceed his limited cognitive capacities – but his behaviour is honest almost by definition. Because he lacks self-knowledge, however, authenticity as we have defined it eludes him. It would seem, then, that Gump is the paradigm of sincerity without authenticity.

Perhaps this conclusion is too hasty. It depends on the assumption that one cannot be true to anything without knowing what it is to which one is being true – thus his ignorance with respect to his own motives precludes Gump’s being authentic. But is this naïve character not indeed consummately, compulsively himself in view of that very absence of self-knowledge? There appear to be no layers to his personality; he suffers from no internal tension. Everything he does strikes us as innocent, undiluted Gump. As Trilling says, to be true to oneself means, “as carpenters and bricklayers use the word, [to be] precisely aligned with him” (4). Was there ever a person more precisely aligned with himself than Forrest Gump?

I have portrayed Gump for the sake of argument as a one-dimensional person whose identity is perhaps defined by its very transparency, such that he can do nothing but be sincere. If we exclude Gump from the definition of authenticity on this basis, it suggests that only certain people can possess the type of self-knowledge at stake in authenticity, namely people with relatively complex identities. This strikes me as reasonable because it is not just any self-knowledge that suffices to characterize the authentic person; specifically, it is the kind of self-knowledge that one acquires through reflection and effort.\footnote{Trilling observes that psychoanalysis is a tiring excavation of the self in search of its authenticity: “The therapeutic process of psychoanalysis would seem to constitute a very considerable effort of self-knowledge, a strenuous attempt to identify and overcome in the mental life of the individual an inauthenticity which is not the less to be deplored because it is enforced and universal” (143).}
I may be mistaken in my assumption that Gump is free of conflict and therefore not in need of self-examination – or even if he is, this might be a situation obtainable only in literature, not in real life. It is difficult to imagine that any real person is so one-dimensional as to possess complete self-knowledge without effort. As Frankfurt argues, any particular motive we have is very likely to be inconsistent with at least one other, and reconciling them tends to require conscientious psychological work. This work is precisely part of what we value in the authentic individual. Unwavering sincerity with respect to others, such as Gump displays, is not sufficient for authenticity; internal wholeheartedness is also required, and that usually demands an intimate confrontation with conflicting layers of one’s self. So a person who lacks hard-earned self-knowledge cannot be authentic, even if she is sincere. Moreover, even if Gump is free of internal conflict (that is, if he is wholehearted in Frankfurt’s terminology), that this is due to simplicity rather than acts of reconciliation removes him from contention for authenticity.

Another reason we balk at counting someone as simplistic as Gump in the ranks of the authentic is because his actions, however “true to himself” they happen to be, achieve that status at best coincidentally, not intentionally. This is a direct result of his lack of self-knowledge or complexity. Gump does not set out to behave in a manner consistent with his most constitutive motives at the expense of ones he finds more foreign. Such intentionality\(^\text{18}\) would of course be impossible since he lacks any critical distance from those motives. If he chooses actions that happily coincide with some essential self, the overlap is fortuitous. By contrast, we tend to think of the authentic person as making deliberate choices about how to live her life. Tremendous changes in life direction should issue from a conscious change in

\(^{18}\) I am using this loaded term in a strictly action-oriented sense, not in the manner used by phenomenologists or philosophers of mind.
motives, not merely contingent changes in circumstances, as they do in Gump’s life. For instance, a person who chooses to leave a lucrative career in finance in order to pursue a dream of writing fiction strikes us as more authentic, ceteris paribus, than a bored finance executive who happens to receive a book deal. This is on the assumption that the authentic person determined her inner writer to be more constitutive of her real identity than the career she was in, and chose to rearrange her life accordingly. Hence, as indicated by the criterion of wholeheartedness, authenticity seems to entail self-knowledge and intentionality, both of which Gump lacks.

Nonetheless, we might not want to say that Gump is positively inauthentic. While inauthenticity may be distinguished by the absence of self-knowledge, it could be said to share with authenticity the trait of intentionality. If authenticity does not happen by accident, perhaps neither does inauthenticity. For instance, if the aforementioned finance executive were to recognize and identify with her desire to be a fiction writer, but nonetheless persist in a career that made her feel dissatisfied or uncomfortable, we would call her inauthentic. One who is simply ignorant about himself, such as Gump, may be neither authentic nor inauthentic. This in turn will have implications for sincerity. I will return to this problem shortly.

IV. Authenticity without Sincerity, Sincerity without Authenticity

In order to further test the hypothesis about the distinction between authenticity and sincerity, let us consider a person who is the opposite of Gump: wholehearted, self-knowledgeable and deliberate, but insincere. An example is furnished by another character from Hamlet. The murderous king Claudius lives insincerely by enjoying the rewards of his
crime while everyone believes his predecessor to have died of natural causes. He lies to
everybody – except to himself. Indeed, Claudius shows himself to be evil to a disturbingly
thorough degree by virtue of this internal consistency:

My fault is past – but O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? ‘Forgive me my foul murder’?
That cannot be since I am still possessed
Of those effects for which I did the murder –
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

May one be pardoned and retain th’offence? (Hamlet III.iii.51-55, 97-98)

As Frankfurt requires, Claudius chooses to identify with one consistent set of desires at the
expense of another. He is unwilling to identify with his desire for remorse because he
understands that it would logically deprive him of the consequences of his other desires, to
which he still clings.¹⁹ Hence his attempts at prayer are hollow: he has expunged his desires
for forgiveness from the consistent set of desires with which he identifies. While his
priorities are reprehensible, his reasoning is remarkably lucid. On the criteria of
wholeheartedness, self-knowledge, and intentionality, the masterful liar Claudius is in fact
authentic.²⁰

Polonius’ advice to his son about the causal relationship between self-truthfulness
and truthfulness to others is thus belied by his own friend.²¹ This example shows that

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¹⁹ Notice that this illustrates the incongruence between wholeheartedness and morality.
²⁰ This is the same constellation of traits in Molière’s character Tartuffe, whom Trilling also cites as an example
of self-truthfulness combined with external duplicity (16). Claudius and Tartuffe may not be truly authentic if
we want to build morality into the definition of authenticity, but I leave this question aside for now.
²¹ One could just as easily identify the same unexpected combination of authenticity and insincerity in Hamlet.
Hamlet deliberately presents himself as mad, which (at least initially) he is not, after taking a careful inventory
of his motives and adopting a wholehearted strategy to achieve a certain aim.
authenticity does not imply sincerity. Claudius can be true to his own self while being false to every other man.

Can Claudius’ situation be reversed? Can one be true to others while being false to oneself? This was not sufficiently answered in the Gump example because, as we saw, he is neither obviously inauthentic nor authentic.

If one could be sincere yet inauthentic, this would take the form of being true to others while being false to oneself. This is incoherent, except insofar as a person is ignorant of or mistaken about who she really is. In principle a person could genuinely believe herself to be one way, and lead others to believe she is that way, when in fact she is very different.22

This exposes a new element of sincerity: sincerity entails representing oneself to others as one actually understands oneself. If I understand my motives to be X, Y, and Z, then I am sincere insofar as I lead others to believe that my motives are X, Y, and Z – even if my motives are actually A, B and C. I could then, at least theoretically, be sincere and inauthentic. For instance, Tom may go to visit his grandmother believing that his motive is to raise her spirits, and accordingly lead his parents and her caregivers to believe the same thing. In actual fact, he visits her because she always gives him his favourite foods; if she did not, he would stop visiting her. But Tom is not aware of this underlying, less praiseworthy motive for visiting his grandmother. He sincerely believes that his motive is selfless, but insofar as he is mistaken about this, his sincerity also indicates an absence of authenticity.

With Gump it is impossible to say for certain whether he is mistaken about his real motives, or correct but incredibly shallow, as suggested by his paper-thin character. Either

22 I am not necessarily suggesting that there is some objective truth about what or who a person really is, but I certainly think that it is possible for there to be a disparity between who we think we are and who we actually are, or why we think we do something and why we actually do it.
way, his sincerity does not depend on any deep self-knowledge. He represents himself exclusively as he understands himself, however superficial that understanding is. This shows that sincerity can be a trivial virtue and perhaps not worth caring much about. I will call this the thin account of sincerity. We might prefer a more rigorous criterion of sincerity that includes correct self-knowledge as well as non-dissimulation to others. To be sincere on this version requires more than showing people who one thinks one is; it requires showing others who one actually is. On this thicker account of sincerity, Gump might cease to be sincere as well as authentic. Without accurate self-knowledge, one might neither be true to oneself nor meaningfully true to others.

Rousseau’s character Julie is also sincere but her authenticity is highly questionable. In Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse, after years of a passionate love affair with St. Preux, the young woman reluctantly goes along with her father’s plan to marry her to an older man for whom she has no feelings. In a letter to her former lover after the marriage, she describes the unexpected transformation that overtook her in the church: “It was as if an unknown power repaired all at once the disorder of my affections and re-established them in accordance with the law of duty and nature” (Rousseau, Julie 292). Thenceforth, Julie claims to be happy in her virtuous marriage to Wolmar and tells St. Preux that “Julie de Wolmar is no longer your former Julie” (Rousseau, Julie 299). Nonetheless, they continue to correspond and even have a private reunion on the grounds of her husband’s estate. As Williams notes, there are

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23 Williams argues that the value of sincerity also implies the value of truth, i.e. that the sincere assertions be accurate as well (Truth 149).

24 Trilling also makes distinctions between types of sincerity, but his fault lines are national: “In French literature sincerity consists in telling the truth about oneself to oneself and to others; by truth is meant a recognition of such of one’s own traits or actions as are morally or socially discreditable and, in conventional course, concealed. English sincerity does not demand this confrontation of what is base or shameful in oneself. Not to know oneself in the French fashion and make public what one knows, but to be oneself, in action, in deeds . . . this is what the English sincerity consists in” (58). On this definition, Gump’s sincerity is more English than French.
“layered ambiguities that surround Julie’s passion for her lover” and the content of their letters “leave it compellingly indeterminate how her feelings are to be described” (Truth 183). It is certainly questionable whether she is being true to herself, and if so, what that truthfulness consists in: did she truly experience a change of heart about St. Preux? Did she successfully suppress her passion by identifying (as Frankfurt might require) more strongly with her sense of virtue? Readers have analyzed these possibilities for centuries. What is clear is that Julie’s authenticity or lack thereof has no impact on her capacity for sincerity. She continues to pour her heart out in epistolary format throughout the emotional twists and turns of her story, and as far as we know her disclosures are genuine.  

V. Role-Playing and Shtick

I hasten to point out that the view of the self implied by these fine-grained distinctions between sincerity and authenticity resembles the essentialist account that I have already called into question. Sharp divisions between “who I am” and “what I tell others I am” depend on a narrow view of behaviour and identity. Specifically, they require that I have some ready-made, independent identity, and that it be immune to my interactions with others. Only then can I choose to present my true identity to others sincerely or insincerely. Many philosophers, especially in the feminist and postmodern traditions, would be skeptical of such premises, and consequently of the distinction between authenticity and sincerity – and with good reason. Because we live in a social world permeated with behavioural norms, our identity often contains a performative element that blurs the lines between the “true” self

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25 As readers of an epistolary novel that contains no narrative outside the characters’ letters to one another, we can no more verify Julie’s sincerity to her correspondents than they can. This is an interesting feature of the relationship between sincerity and authenticity in fiction: since there is no real person named Julie with a subjective perspective on her authenticity, we can only assess a character’s authenticity from the same vantage point from which we usually assess sincerity, i.e. what the character tells us.
and the self that is presented to others. Moreover, the assumption that we have at any given moment a single, true identity, which can be either reflected or denied in our conduct, assumes a level of metaphysical essentialism and stagnancy in personal identity that is repugnant to many.

The solution to this concern is not to reject any theory of sincerity and authenticity outright, but to modify the account of the self implied by them. One innocuous modification, for instance, is to acknowledge the multiplicity of identity which manifests itself in the social world. The effect might be to stretch the category of the sincere. Consider the notion of role-playing, which can be viewed, as in the Renaissance literature Trilling reviews, as a type of dissimulation. Molière’s Tartuffe is obviously role-playing: he pretends to be a pious clergyman while revealing his impiety to the audience. But not all public personas are such clear-cut examples of insincerity.\(^{26}\) We behave differently among different people, drawing from a repertoire of identities to suit the situation – sometimes the pious man, sometimes the thinker, sometimes the flirt. We readily describe ourselves “in the role of” mother, student, Canadian, and so on, without intending to compromise the authenticity, as it were, of any of them. Roles are not masks intended to disguise who we are, but are the very content of who we are. Sometimes these facets of our identities simply would not exist without the opportunity to “act them out” in a public way; regardless, they are facets that cannot all be expressed at once. In other words, we have embraced the notion that identity is not singular, and that our “performance” of multiple roles is reconcilable with a belief in enduring identity. Embodying roles, one or more at a time, seems consistent with the possibility of both sincerity and authenticity, as long as we understand these traits to refer to complex,

\(^{26}\)Trilling observes that role-playing was of particular concern to early modern audiences, in an era when newfound social mobility threatened to dislodge the established code by which one recognized a person’s social station (16). This is of course less of a concern to us now.
situation-dependent parts of identity. Whereas early Moderns might have disparagingly characterized such social roles as pretence, post-moderns are more likely to describe them as evidence of the versatile and dynamic nature of identity. We do not approach social situations as stagnant, ready-made selves. The self is formed, at least in part, through interactions with others.\textsuperscript{27} Williams urges that

we must leave behind the assumption that we first and immediately have a transparent self-understanding, and then go on either to give other people a sincere revelation of our belief . . . or else dissimulate in a way that will mislead them . . . we are all together in the social activity of mutually stabilizing our declarations and moods and impulses into becoming such things as beliefs and relatively steady attitudes. (\textit{Truth} 193)

It follows that the prospect of being sincere is less straightforward than simply telling the truth about oneself, since the self is not a dissociated object of interpretation. To the extent that my identity evolves along with my self-revelation to others, it may seem superfluous to distinguish between truthfulness to myself and truthfulness to others. Thus we can see how Polonius, ahead of his time, might have come to the conclusion that authenticity is somehow bound up with sincerity.

Nonetheless, even on dialogical and deflationary accounts of the self, the separation between self and other never totally disintegrates. Although my identity is being molded in a social context, I reserve the ability to express or withhold my beliefs about myself – whether they are “accurate” or not. There is always some space for choosing between sincerity and dissimulation. As such, the authenticity of the self-relation cannot necessarily determine the

\textsuperscript{27} Butler goes further, arguing that gender identity is nothing more than the performance of socially-inscribed norms (179). I critique this view below.
sincerity of the others-relation. “To thine own self be true” might be sage advice, but if so, it
is not on the basis of its instrumental relation to sincerity.

Moreover, an appreciation of how identity is made up of legitimate roles is not
tantamount to sanctioning any role whatsoever. We can still identify – and condemn –
genuine pretence and outright lying; not all social performances are de facto sincere. We
would not say, even on a revised theory of the self, that Tartuffe is sincere because he plays
the role of a priest. He is not, by any standard, a priest. Nor would we say that he is
sincere because hypocrisy and opportunism are feelings he genuinely experiences.
Pretending to be something you are not is insincere by definition. His is an easy case.

A tougher case is seen in a situation of minor exaggeration or self-consciousness.
Recall Sartre’s example of the waiter. Sartre judges that the waiter is in bad faith – that is,
inauthentic – based on his movements. As argued in Chapter 3, I believe this conclusion is
unwarranted. However we might agree that the waiter, as described by Sartre, appears to be
less than fully sincere. He is a waiter, but if Sartre is to be believed, he is trying too hard at
fulfilling that role. He is too quick, too attentive, too self-conscious. He is possibly
caricaturing his mental image of the ideal waiter. None of this means that he is lying about
being a waiter, but perhaps there is a discrepancy between the degree to which he feels
himself to be a waiter and the degree to which he presents himself as such. If he were more
sincere, he might perform his café duties less conspicuously. He is not pretending to be
something he’s not, but he might be pretending to be it to an exaggerated degree.

Many people experience this intentional, albeit slight, disparity between identity and
role. We often play up aspects of our identity on purpose in order to achieve a particular

28 If Tartuffe were suffering delusions that he was a priest, then his behaviour could be considered sincere. This
would be an instance of “thin sincerity,” since the content of his beliefs about himself would be false. He is not
a priest in the way that society defines priesthood, and without which priesthood as such would cease to exist.
persona. We have what can be called a shtick. Imagine that Dave is a person whose athletic ineptitude is well-known. He may come to define himself in part by this deficiency and even exaggerate it for the amusement it provides. Being bad at sports is his shtick. So when, at a picnic with friends, a Frisbee comes in his direction, he feigns terror and blocks his face with his hands. He might have been able to catch it, but in a split-second evaluation he reasoned that it would be funnier to not even try. Dave has little facility with disc-catching, but he knows that a softly sailing piece of rubber will not actually hurt him. He is quasi-sincere: he plays up his athletic ineptitude on purpose, exaggerating the role that he sincerely inhabits. Being mostly poor at sports is not especially amusing. Being afraid of sports equipment is.

Dave is both sincere and insincere, authentic and inauthentic. It is true that he is generally unable to catch Frisbees, and he is comfortable revealing this to his friends. However, by exaggerating this trait to the point that he no longer even tries to catch Frisbees, Dave is simultaneously revealing and concealing his true abilities. He is sacrificing a certain measure of sincerity for the sake of something else, which might be a more constitutive part of his identity, and hence authentic in its own right – the desire to amuse his friends, for example, or to cultivate trademark characteristics in order to achieve certain social ends. Such trade-offs are commonplace and attest to the interconnection between authenticity and sincerity. We choose how to behave, and consequently how much of our true selves to heed, partly in consideration of how we want to present ourselves to others. Dave is not only revealing certain parts of his identity, but actively constituting himself as a person who is hopeless at sports.

By incorporating the insight that the self is not a rigorously defined interior object, we can see that sincerity comes in degrees and that authenticity is bound up with sincerity
insofar as behaviour – what we show others of ourselves – contributes directly to the content of our selves as well as to the impression we make.

VI. Performativity, or the Absence of Identity

One of the most radical theses about the overlap between personal identity and social performance is championed by Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues for the notion of performativity in her analysis of gender identity. Claiming that gender is not a natural category, but culturally coded through gestures and signs, she concludes that we cannot speak of a “true” gender identity that undergirds an individual’s gender performance. The notion of such a pre-existing identity, she says, is illusory:

Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance . . . Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity they purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler 173)

Butler contrasts performativity with expressiveness, which refers to the presentation of a pre-existing identity such as we have been assuming to be possible in discussions of sincerity: “If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial” (180). If gender attributes are performative, Butler continues, there are “no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the

29 Although her analysis in *Gender Trouble* focuses on questions of identity relating to sex, gender, and desire, her deflationary position with respect to metaphysical identity is applicable to other areas of personal identity as well.
postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction” (180). In the case of gender identity, if not other aspects of identity as well, Butler believes that simple expression is not possible.\textsuperscript{30}

In pulling the ontological rug out from under the notion of gender identity, Butler forecloses the possibility of a distinction between sincerity and authenticity with respect to gender. I cannot be insincere about my gender identity in my conduct since it is that conduct alone that amounts to my gender identity. Even more concerning for my project, Butler’s theory of gender is hostile to the structure of authenticity as such. If there is no identity (gender or otherwise) separate from its social performance or construction, it becomes nonsensical to talk about the convergence between one’s identity or true self and one’s behaviour. Her skepticism of the metaphysics of substance calls into question the very intuition that something ontological persists under the manifold behaviours that we attribute over time to a single identity. She claims that “[o]ntology is . . . not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground” (Butler 189).

Butler is arguing not that identity is socially conditioned, or that we must distinguish between genuine identity and adopted artifice, but something much more severe: she is claiming that there is no such thing as identity, at least when it comes to gender. The gender by which people “identify themselves” – say as feminine, masculine, or drag – have no correlate in the individual’s inner constitution. They are pure performance.

\textsuperscript{30} Recall that Taylor attributes to some Romantic thinkers what he calls “expressivism,” which is slightly more complicated than what Butler means by “expression” insofar as the medium helps to define the content of what is expressed. Proponents of eighteenth century expressivism would agree with Butler that identity is not entirely formed prior to being expressed (or per-formed) but disagree that nothing essential precedes that performance.
We might take Butler's view to its logical conclusion and ask whether the source of one's identity even matters. As long as individuals identify with something, in the sense of feeling comfortable and wanting to be known a certain way, what difference could it make whether the identity is generated by internal or external cues? This approach takes some of the air out of Butler's critique: so what if gender identity is artificial? I still identify one way and not the other, for whatever reason.

I do not find this view of identity as entirely contingent to be plausible, however, not only because it renders questions of authenticity moot, but moreover because it denies the basic fact of agency that gives rise to our belief in authenticity. Even if the identity to which we cling is artificial, and not of our own invention or derivative of our nature, there is an “I” that chooses at some point to make that identification. Butler might respond that in our heterosexist gender-polarized culture, any choice to identify otherwise is illusory. Be that as it may (and I endorse Butler's political line of thought) there is some basis upon which individuals come to identify with a gender or with any other social role. That basis must be, in the final analysis, something that we can call the individual’s identity. Regardless of whether we conceive of the self as an essential core or as an unhinged collection of choices, to accept that people identify with certain roles and not others invites Frankfurt’s line of questioning: perhaps the role itself is not internal to me, but what about the motive to identify with the role, or the motive to have that motive, and so on? Something about me – however elusive – will eventually intervene in the chain to account for how I identify myself.

Hence, despite Butler’s stern dissent, performativity is not a serious challenge to my account of authenticity and sincerity. Although our choices of identification are limited and

31 I am talking about metaphysical difference, not political. Clearly Butler is arguing that there are political implications to her view. I am only interested here in whether her account disrupts our understanding of what it means for a person to have an identity.
prescribed without our consent, we forge an identity on the basis of some internal response to
the external prescription. That internal response – whatever its origin – is a signal of
identity.

VII. Gay by Nature, Authentic by Choice

Having considered the mutability of character traits as well as the contribution of
performance and social influences to the development of the self, it would seem that no
aspect of personal identity may be regarded as consistent and unchangeable. This would be
an unfortunate conclusion for a project that seeks to ground the notion of authenticity, but I
think it is also false. Before concluding this section, I will argue that at least one or two
aspects of personal identity can be “true” or “false” and accordingly yield straightforward
answers about the requirements of authenticity. They derive this status from their inborn
origins, but unlike physical appearance and musical talent, they form a more subjective part
of our identity.

There is much debate in the scientific community, the gay rights movement, identity
politics literature, and larger political forums about the origins of homosexuality and
homosexual behaviour. Some of the most fascinating questions deal with how and why an
individual may go from identifying as one sexual orientation to another. If a person comes
out of the closet after decades of living as a heterosexual, was he being “inauthentic” before?
If a devout Christian claims he has been “cured” of his homosexuality and lives the rest of
his life as a heterosexual, is he inauthentic? If a self-identified straight woman engages in
lesbian sex on several occasions, is she inauthentic? The answers might depend on as yet
unrevealed scientific evidence for the genetic origin of sexual orientation, but the question of
authenticity is posed regardless: is sexual orientation an immutable component of one’s identity?

I argued earlier that every life involves a certain amount of change, including, for some, a profound change of character. But there might be parts of oneself that are immune to change – that is to say, certain properties that remain constant even if behaviour is inconsistent. I would contend that for most people, sexual orientation is one such part. Sexual orientation is not an immediately apparent property, as it emerges along with particular life experiences and requires the proper conditions to announce itself; yet, once announced, assuming hospitable circumstances, it remains a marker of identity. The failure to honour one’s sexual orientation is an example of inauthenticity insofar as our sexual orientation is a property that accompanies us from birth to death.

Recall how this issue was handled by Sartre in his examination of bad faith. Sartre declared his fictitious homosexual to be in bad faith because the man attempted to downplay the fact of his same-sex encounters and distance himself from the free choice with which he undertook them. His friend was said to be in bad faith because he laid too much stress on the existence of these experiences, attempting to pin the first man as “homosexual” once and for all. Today we would be inclined to agree with Sartre’s reproval of both men, but for different reasons. The first man should not deny his homosexual past – but not because sexual encounters are all isolated choices that turn into facticity as soon as they are accomplished. Instead, individual sexual encounters reflect and eventually constitute a lifelong “orientation.” The friend might be chastised only for insinuating that a homosexual orientation is a poor one to have.
Some make the mistake of connecting the moral approval or disapproval of homosexuality to its genetic or social status, with gays demanding respect on the basis that they were born that way and religious zealots persecuting them on the grounds that God makes no one homosexual. From an ethical standpoint this debate is moot – discrimination against gays is unjustified in either case – but from a metaphysical standpoint it raises important questions. Both religious zealots and certain radical feminists or post-structuralists, who claim that a particular sexual orientation may be simply adopted at will, miss the force of “orientation” as a descriptor of personal identity. The concept of sexual orientation implies that one’s sexual identity is at least mostly beyond one’s control, and that, contra Sartre, one’s past sexual behaviour – if undertaken authentically – is indeed a good predictor of one’s future behaviour. Unlike many personality traits, therefore, sexual orientation seems to stand the test of time. For Sartre, “orientation” is meaningless: one is not “gay” or “heterosexual” but rather one simply has past sexual experiences and an open future. This is empirically specious. Evidence shows that if someone has only had sexual encounters with people of one sex in the past, feels comfortable expressing his desires, and is given the opportunity to pursue love objects of either sex, he will probably continue to form sexual bonds with that one sex throughout his life. This suggests that sexual identity is indeed mostly a matter of biological determination, rather than pure choice or social construction. That so many people apparently “change” orientations (as in the examples above) is not evidence against the orientation theory, but perhaps only evidence of high rates

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32 Foucault falls imperfectly in this category. He argues that “[s]exuality is something we ourselves create...Sex is not a fatality; it’s a possibility for creative life” (Foucault, *Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity in Ethics* 163). His position does not deny the existence of sexual orientation but nuances it by leaving open the possibility of new pleasures and encouraging experimentation and transgression. Unlike Sartre, Foucault avoids using identity language such as “sexual orientation” because of political, rather than metaphysical commitments: eschewing labels is a way of challenging power, not essentialist ontology per se.
of inauthenticity or bisexuality.\textsuperscript{33} We speak about gay people “coming out of the closet” because we now understand that repressive social forces compel them to pretend that they are heterosexual when in fact they are not.

This is not to say that anyone who formerly had lovers of one sex and then had lovers of another sex went from inauthentic to authentic. Indeed, such a facile conclusion would be guilty of assuming the polarization of sexual orientation, much as Butler argues that we are misled to believe that there are only two, mutually exclusive genders. As Kinsey shockingly suggested over sixty years ago, sexual orientation might best be understood as a spectrum rather than a dichotomy.\textsuperscript{34} The spectrum hypothesis adds nuance to our understanding of sexual orientation without challenging the nature hypothesis. If someone is by nature bisexual, then we would expect her to seek out both male and female lovers without any of her experiences being inauthentic to her orientation.

Unlike character, then, which may be determined in part by genes but is certainly subject to change, sexual orientation appears to accompany us throughout our lives and forms an important component of our identity. But inauthenticity is possible because we are not always aware of our sexual orientation or free to practice it without reproach. Because of the role of social repression in influencing sexual behaviour, however, this type of inauthenticity should not necessarily be tainted with character judgment; a homosexual who

\textsuperscript{33} There is no doubt that social norms have a profound impact on sexual behaviour, but this can be distinguished (in principle) from orientation. During the centuries when homosexuality was frowned upon in Western civilization, there were not necessarily fewer gay people but these individuals were forced to adopt a heterosexual (and hence, for them, inauthentic) lifestyle. (My grandfather used to insist that there were no gay people in his native Polish town.) That so many men engaged in homosexual relations in ancient Greece does not mean that the social norms affected their orientation, but rather that sex between men occurred frequently for reasons other than gay desire. People have sex for countless reasons, only some of which are determined by their orientation, i.e. sexual desire. Some female sex workers, for instance, who only service men in their professional life, identify as lesbians and choose women lovers in their private lives.

\textsuperscript{34} Kinsey’s scale ranges from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual) and also includes a rating for asexuality.
is still “closeted” may be inauthentic but not blameworthy or less deserving of our understanding than one who is “out.”

If sexual orientation is one of the few essential “facts” about identity, how helpful is it to talk about authenticity in this context? For Sartre, the facts about our human situation in general and personal situation in particular demand a response (“transcendence”), which can be authentic or inauthentic. As we saw in Chapter 3, it is not always clear what would constitute an authentic reaction. I am suggesting that sexual orientation is also a matter of facticity, but that it is clear what an authentic or inauthentic response to it would look like. Simply put, sexual behaviour that accords with sexual orientation is authentic; behaviour that does not is inauthentic. But even this measure of authenticity is limited, as it only refers to the authenticity of the behaviour with respect to orientation. We can imagine scenarios in which the same behaviour yields conflicting readings of authenticity. Someone who identifies as gay but engages in heterosexual sex for money, say, may be inauthentic to her orientation but authentic to some other part of her identity. Likewise, if that same gay person has sex with someone of the same sex, the act is not de facto authentic: it may be authentic orientation-wise, but not as measured against something else, such as willingness to engage in the act.

It follows that whenever an aspect of personal identity can be recognized as factual – that is, whenever there is something empirically true about a person – authenticity is relatively easy to gauge. I choose sexual orientation as an example of such facticity, however, because of its unique complexity and interaction with social and cultural factors. Recognizing one’s sexual orientation is not as simple as recognizing certain other inborn aspects of identity, such as physical disability or hair colour. This is partly in virtue of
society’s multiple and often contradictory messages about sexuality, which result in a great deal of inauthentic sexual behaviour, confusion about identity, and social posturing. Moreover, because sexual identity expresses itself through behaviour, there is a clearer correlation between this type of facticity and the attendant authentic conduct than there might be in the case of identity traits that are not so expressive.  

An increasingly vocal minority is making clear that gender identity, like sexual orientation, can also admit of authentic or inauthentic manifestations. Transgender people are those whose gender identity does not match the biological sex to which society deems to it to be linked (i.e. male-masculine, female-feminine). Many of them feel that the gender assigned to them at birth is an inauthentic expression of their actual identity. As this is a matter of subjective experience, I accept that such mismatches are possible, and that a change in gender identity provides, for them, a meaningful indicator of authenticity; but this is not necessarily generalizable. Given that gender behaviour is culturally charged, we cannot say that every person has a “true” gender identity at birth that may be authentically or inauthentically enacted; we may only say that they have certain chromosomes or genitalia. Gender identity is by definition an interaction with one’s particular culture. Sexual orientation, by contrast, precedes culture and, in my estimation, remains constant despite the myriad influences on sexual behaviour that we encounter in our society.

Sexual orientation is not the only aspect of personal identity that has a factual status from birth to death. Ethnic identity is another. We encountered a discussion of the role ethnic identity might play in freedom and authenticity in Sartre’s Anti-Semite and Jew. As I

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35 For example, how can one be “authentic” to their hair colour? Or even to a physical disability? These are biological facts about a person but they do not result in any obvious behaviours.

36 Biological sex, which is usually binary (male-female) but can admit of variation (intersex), must be distinguished from both sexual orientation (desire) and gender (socially encoded behaviours attributed to each sex).
argued there, Sartre’s definition of Jewishness\textsuperscript{37} in terms of persecution (or any other form of interpersonal relation) denies the status of ethnic identity as a constant. It is uncontroversial for most people today that this type of identity is factual, immutable, and present whether one chooses to emphasize it or not. Like sexual orientation, ethnic identity represents one part of the truth about an individual. We can react to these truths in different ways – we may wholeheartedly embrace them, deny them, or be indifferent to them – yet, unlike our character, which is malleable, we cannot change them.\textsuperscript{38}

The difference between Sartre’s assessment of the homosexual and his analysis of the Jew lies in their susceptibility to claims about authenticity. Sexual orientation dictates the content of authentic sexual behaviour to some extent, but correctly identifying one’s ethnicity does not yield any obvious rules for authentic conduct. While I think Sartre is wrong to define authenticity for the Jew in terms of confronting his “situation” – in no small part because I reject the premise that the situation defines the Jew – I have no alternative explanation of what authenticity would mean in this case. There is no way for a Jew to be categorically “authentic” or “inauthentic” qua Jew. Of course, people pass such judgments all the time: a black person whose behavior appears to conform to Caucasian norms will be labeled an “oreo cookie”; a Jew who supports the plight of the Palestinians and questions the State of Israel will be dubbed a “self-hating Jew.” Such judgments, usually made by other

\textsuperscript{37} I say “Jewishness” and not “Judaism” because this argument pertains only to ethnic identity, not to religious affiliation. A Jew may convert to another religion, but remains by birth a member of the “Jewish people” (according to matrilineal continuity). Some dispute this sharp distinction between Jewish faith and Jewish heritage, which arguably does not apply to any other religion. One need not accept my interpretation, however, to recognize the force of the argument: ethnic identity and race are uncontrollable and unchangeable aspects of personal identity. A person with black skin cannot recreate himself as biologically white; a person born in Italy to Italian parents cannot change his Italian heritage; and so on. Moreover, these markers of identity define us in society whether we want them to or not.

\textsuperscript{38} Consider the following parable: A man is walking down 5th Avenue and stops in front of a synagogue, where a hunchback sits on the steps. Gesturing at the synagogue, he says, “I used to be a Jew.” The hunchback says, “I used to be a hunchback.”
members of the same group, may be based on subtle and ever-shifting metrics of group identity. What is interesting in this phenomenon is that the group members who make the judgment appear to feel that their own authenticity depends on every member of their group upholding a certain code of behaviour by which the identity can be reliably maintained. In cases of group identity, one person’s authenticity might affect, even threaten, the authenticity of everyone else.

Compared with sexual orientation and even gender identity, then, ethnic identity yields fewer indications of authentic behaviour, although it likewise accompanies individuals throughout their lives and may contribute palpably to their sense of self. This is because, first, ethnic identity is not obviously linked to particular actions or relationships the way that sexual and gender identity are, and second, because ethnic identity would be meaningless without a group of people who identify the same way and collectively establish the norms of living with that identity.

VIII. Narrowing in on the True Self

I have not yet forwarded a constructive account of authenticity that differs from its rivals in the philosophical literature. In the course of these investigations, however, we have identified some features that certainly belong or do not belong to the concept. I have shown why a number of presumed synonyms for authenticity, including “originality” and “sincerity,” are not truly interchangeable for authenticity, but that authenticity may lead to originality or sincerity. I have pointed out why we think that authenticity is a deliberate and reflective way of being, rather than something that can be stumbled upon accidentally. And I have shown how there are certain traits that accompany us throughout life that may, in turn,
correspond to authentic or inauthentic behaviours. These intermediary conclusions show some progress in our conceptual development, but they do not yet constitute a solution to the puzzle of how to be authentic.

What remains clear is this: authenticity can only be measured against some true things about an individual, and those things include desires, motives, cultural determinants, dispositions, and other traits. The reason that authenticity proves slippery as a concept is that most of the items on that list are subject to change, social construction, or interpretation. Only biological and hereditary facts about a person are objectively true, and knowing them in most cases does not lead to particularly meaningful authentic behaviour (with the possible exception of sexual orientation). The rest of our identity is potentially fluid and often hidden. This is why authenticity requires self-knowledge – but we must understand this term in a particular sense, having already seen how the self eludes the kind of knowledge that can be verified or guaranteed over time. Hence authenticity is a problem of temporality (recalling Heidegger) and of insight: we are not, to quote Nietzsche, ‘‘men of knowledge’ with respect to ourselves’’ (15). But this in no way vindicates the postmodern or eliminativist position that there is nothing true about a person, that identity does not exist. Identity could exist and yet remain coy.
CHAPTER 7
REFLECTIVE CONSISTENCY

In the course of the preceding chapters, I have argued that the most influential twentieth-century conceptions of authenticity are inadequate. They all tend to hinge the self with which authentic behaviour should converge on something transient or abstract, which leads to the collapse of the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity. I have maintained that authenticity should be explained as a relation of the self to itself, and that the difficulty of isolating the true self is the source of our confusion about authenticity. There are many fruitful and compelling ways to think about selfhood and how we come to have a certain identity, but most strain to fit into the metaphysical structure of authenticity. I will now put forward an account of authenticity that I believe explains what the true self consists in as well as the limitations of both philosophy and personal experience in identifying it. The result is that authenticity is largely speculative and not necessarily correlated to making oneself into a better person, but the view I defend gives shape to a unique concept that captures what is essential about an individual at a given moment.

I. The Reflective Consistency Account of Authenticity

We have seen that the strictly essentialist model of selfhood demanded by authenticity breaks down under scrutiny. To speak of a “true self” that subsists beneath a veneer of contingency and conformity depends on, first, a rigorous separation between internal and external that supposes a pre-existing, asocial self, and second, consistency in the self over time. Both of these assumptions have been shown to be flawed. Our identities are
formed in unpredictable ways by myriad different forces and they evolve over the course of our lives. But this does not mean that the entirety of our identity as individuals is up for grabs – that we can be absolutely anyone, as Sartre, Butler, and (to a lesser extent) Foucault all argue. We can still believe that there are certain relatively imperturbable truths about ourselves and that some things are simply foreign to our selves no matter where or how long we live. The true self is not that collection of traits or beliefs that remains consistent over time, but that set that would persist across different iterations of an individual’s situation at a given moment. The repetition or multiplicity that needs consistency is not temporal; it is not a question of comparing one’s reaction to the same situation now, in two years, in five years, and so on. Rather, it is a process of reflecting on different possibilities in the same moment. We can imagine ourselves feeling or acting differently with respect to something, yet still being the same person. We can accommodate these hypothetical changes in our selfhood without relinquishing our sense of self. That which holds the self together across these imaginary iterations is the only sense we can make of the idea of the true self, in relation to which we can in principle be authentic.

Consider a very typical life-decision that will have significant consequences, such as the choice of which university to attend. Suppose I have been accepted to three different universities, all of which would present me with a different blend of opportunities. It is clear that I can imagine a scenario in which I choose each of the three universities, but in actuality I may only choose one. This need not mean, however, that there are no overlapping features of the three scenarios that would point to something fundamental about who I am.¹ On any version of the situation, for instance, I might end up majoring in philosophy, or I might

¹ I leave aside the additional fact that I obviously applied to all three universities prior to this moment, so they must have all appealed to me in some way.
dislike the school I chose and switch in my second year to a different institution. I might, regardless of where I end up, feel out of place in the social milieu of first-year university; or I might spend the whole first year in a drunken stupor. These types of experiences or dispositions, constant across all the possible scenarios, must correspond to something essential about myself, as determined by all the factors in my life up until that point. What makes them hard to identify is that we never have access to the parallel world in which other possibilities can come to fruition.

We saw in the previous two chapters how almost every identity attribute could be subject to change, from our desires to our social personality to our beliefs and convictions. I have argued that an attribute that changes over time is not part of one’s essential identity if that is judged from the standpoint of temporal extension. The true self is therefore not recognizable through consistency over a lifetime; this is unrealistic as well as probably undesirable. But it is still the case that our desires, beliefs, convictions, habits, and dispositions are indicative in some way of who we are and how we ought to behave if we strive to be authentic. Thus, while these might be subject to change over time, the relevant question is whether they are subject to change within the set of possibilities that characterize one’s identity in a given situation. Such possibilities cannot be accessed empirically but only through a conscious act of self-reflection and imaginative identification. I will therefore call it the reflective consistency account of authenticity.

This model is essentialist in the sense that, in a temporal snapshot, there are properties that are by hypothesis essential to the self – for instance, my affection for philosophy, or my sense of isolation from a peer group. The temporal punctuality, however, separates this account from any kind of deterministic or inflexible account of identity,
according to which one remains the same over time. What counts as the true self here is not some pre-destined or immutable set of facts about the individual, but rather a congruence that arises from all the influences, both freely chosen and uncontrollable, that have conspired to create the person in the present situation. Everything from genetic factors to cultural conventions to the individual’s previous choices plays a role in constructing her repertoire of possibilities. Authenticity is a function of the person’s relationship to those possibilities which, for various reasons, arise at that moment. The true self is whatever is consistent – hence necessary – across those possibilities. It is therefore solid by comparison with the possibilities that could have been otherwise, but flexible compared with the notion of a fixed identity over time. It requires reflecting on many aspects of oneself – hypothetical iterations of oneself, specifically – to come to light.

This notion of hypothetical alternatives needs some unpacking. I am not invoking simultaneous alternative universes, but rather referring to an exercise in self-analysis founded upon the self’s openness. The true self is a description of personal identity that remains constant when we can imagine all possible versions of the individual existing side by side. What is “possible” is determined, in ways we cannot quantify, by the person’s past, including both those things that she chose or cultivated and those things over which she had no control. What is essential to a person is whatever endures across all the possibles in a given situation. Naturally, this essence will vary constantly as time and circumstances collude to alter our repertoire of possibilities, hence it is not essentialist in the normal sense. But in that moment, because it endures across my possibilities, it is “necessary.” In calling an aspect of our identity “necessary,” I do not mean that it could not have been otherwise in any universe. Identity traits only become necessary through the particular constraints introduced by other
facts about the world and our lives. It is not necessary to the cosmic order that I major in philosophy. But it might be necessary to my identity given all the unalterable factors that have brought me to this point.

Because we have no empirical access to all the factors that affect our current station, nor to the stations we might occupy had those factors been different, true selfhood and authenticity can only be thought philosophically as speculative categories. But we can and do think this way: for instance, decision-making about important matters can involve taking a careful inventory of all my options and performing an honest evaluation of my motives, with the most constant or most powerful motives rising to the surface. Insofar as only I can know myself this intimately, I confer truth on the self that I deem to be essential to me; it has no truth outside my reflective powers. Authenticity entails living my life in accordance with such self-revealed truth.

It follows from my view that the philosophical content of authenticity is not coextensive with all vulgar uses of authenticity language. Sometimes we have unmediated access to certain assessments of what is non-negotiable and inescapable in our identity. They sometimes present themselves as “gut feelings,” prompting us to say that something “just feels right” or is “so me”. Even if these conclusions were synonymous with those achieved through the process of reflection I have described, the methodology of authenticity would be lacking. At times something may initially appear to be essential but on reflection we realize that it is not. At other times, something may appear to be contingent but reflection proves it to be something more meaningful, because we perceive that it would be constant on any imaginable variation of the situation. Even if our initial inclination remains unaltered, however, authenticity takes time and work. In this respect it resembles the “care of the self”
that Foucault describes as important part of ancient ethics: “epimeleia implies a labor” (Care of the Self, 50).

Ricoeur’s description of character as the convergence between ipse and idem provides a helpful way of thinking about authenticity as the convergence between our choices and our essential traits. We can think of one’s selfhood in an actual moment as ipse – how one behaves, the world that actually comes to pass. Sameness (idem) in this context refers to what would be true of one’s ipseity on any iteration of the moment, the true or essential properties that could not be otherwise. In authenticity, ipse converges with the idem of all possible ipses. The self that acts – the volition that “wins” and becomes our “will” in Frankfurt’s terminology – converges with the true self that would be constant regardless of the agent’s acts or choices. We need not discover sameness over time to grasp this view of the true self. We need only grasp the hypothetical sameness of the moment. This does not make use of Ricoeur’s compelling notion of narrativity, because narrativity is by definition extended over time and temporal extension is, as we saw, very difficult to attach to authenticity. Narrativity may be as close as we can come to considering authenticity or identity over the lifespan, but only the overlap of selfhood and sameness in a moment can yield a precise description of authenticity.

II. Using the Past to Understand the Present

The imaginative exercise of establishing where my ipse converges with my idem may seem daunting, but its possibility can be illustrated through an artistic example. In a recently debuted television series entitled Being Erica, the title character, a 32-year-old who is dissatisfied with her life, encounters a psychotherapist with special powers. He enables her
to return to designated moments in her past that she regrets and to re-live them, in light of what she presently knows, so as to set her life on a better course.² These weekly adventures result in piecemeal improvements in Erica’s present life, but curiously, many things resist the change intended by Erica’s inter-temporal interference. When she returns to an embarrassing high school moment, resolving to vindicate her reputation, she ends up doing something else that is equally if not more embarrassing. When she attempts to cure an ailing relationship by undoing a moment of malice or insensitivity, she returns to the present to find the relationship ailing for some other reason. The message is supposed to be that some things in life are uncontrollable, and the best one can do is reflect on one’s role in a situation and try to choose the course of action that will leave one with the fewest regrets. But the moral is also instructive about authenticity. What might be uncontrollable is not only the situation, but the range of options one has available to address it. The range is limited not only by practicalities and the influence of others, but also by who we are. Even if we could go back in time and do things differently, we might find ourselves ending up in a nearly identical position today through our own choices.

The premise of this television series is different from my imaginary authenticity-testing scenario in significant ways, not the least of which is that it assumes hindsight and the ability to re-do the past in light of subsequent events, whereas my theory excludes the epistemological advantages of time travel. But it serves as a vivid example of how we can imagine events unfolding or having unfolded in slightly different ways through our own agency, without losing the sense that our identity persists and imposes certain constraints on our possibilities. In the process of trying to discover our true self, the goal is not to change

² Conveniently, these little forays into the past never result in extraneous differences in the present. The show eschews the well-known philosophical problems associated with time travel.
the present by re-doing the past, but to learn what is most intractable about or definitive of oneself. Indeed, while Erica undertakes the time travel with the idea of changing her external world, her therapist seems to realize that the benefit of his method is the ability to discern one’s real internal state, for better or for worse. For instance, through her reconsideration of the past, Erica realizes that she has never approved of her sister’s fiancé, and returns to the present urging her not to marry him; and she comes to accept that she is romantically in love with her best friend, Ethan, who has been married to another woman for eight years. These truths had been covered over, one might say, by an inauthentic self-relation informed by external pressures, such as the pressure to support her sister’s choice of partner and to respect the platonic nature of her friendship with Ethan. Her unconventional therapy allows Erica to recognize that these are non-negotiable parts of her identity from which she attempted to flee. Obviously, these are not essential aspects of her identity in all possible worlds; they are dependent on the people she has come to know, the partner that her sister has chosen, and so on. This is why it is important to speak of authenticity as constancy in a situation and not as universal determinism: we need to ask not whom Erica would have fallen in love with based on her situation at birth, but only based on the situation of having met and befriended Ethan, along with all the other circumstances that lead up to her insight. For this fictional character, time travel results in greater self-knowledge, which can explain why some elements of her current life feel inauthentic and why some could not have turned out otherwise.

3 The therapist character appears to endorse unbridled sincerity as much as he champions authenticity: as soon as Erica makes one of these discoveries about herself, through his encouragement she immediately reveals it to the person in question. Her sister never wants to talk to her again, and her friend neglects to reciprocate her love, causing Erica to doubt her decision to be sincere. In these cases, authenticity appears to be inseparable from sincerity. Once Erica comes to recognize her true feelings with respect to the people in question, it is difficult to imagine being authentic to herself while continuing to relate to them as though she felt differently. Perhaps when the content of authenticity regards one’s relations with others, being true to oneself requires sincerely communicating one’s feelings to others as well.
III. Objections to the Account

That the reflective consistency model is so abstract seems to be both an objection to it and an argument in its favour. The latter is so because our investigation has predicted that we could not find an empirically identifiable entity called the true self within our temporal experience. It seems only right, then, that if authenticity should exist, its content should be somehow theoretical or unverifiable. But this is also an obvious detriment to the theory. If the self with which my behaviour ought to converge is a conglomeration of hypothetical alter-egos, it is unclear what the benefit of such an ideal is, much less how to ensure that I’m living up to it. Moreover, the supposition that there would be an overlap in my alter-egos, were I even capable of checking, is susceptible to many of the same criticisms that contributed to my rejection of other theories of authenticity. I shall attempt to address these objections without dismissing the serious questions they raise.

I have been critical of other theories of the self reviewed in this project on the grounds that they assert or assume the existence of psychic entities or mechanisms that cannot be supported by evidence. For example, I questioned Heidegger’s use of “the call of conscience” and Sartre’s judgment that the waiter was in bad faith, both of which can be viewed as philosophers’ inventions. My own proposal may strike some as equally ad hoc. Why suppose that there are any essential elements of someone’s identity given that this can never be verified through our choices? Indeed, why even suppose that the multiplicity of possibilities belongs to the same self? This is an important set of questions.

Regarding the first and most substantial objection, there is no metaphysical proof that we have essential identity traits, but if authenticity has a meaningful domain and is distinct from inauthenticity then it requires that some parts of our identity can be described as
essential. I argued in Chapter 5 that it is illogical to connect authenticity to traits that endure, or that we merely expect to endure, over time, but that such an association is tempting to make because these may often seem like the traits that are most essential to our selves.

Essential properties, however, cannot change over time: if mammals sometimes laid eggs instead of giving birth to live offspring then we could not describe the latter as an essential mammalian characteristic. The description I have given of the true self satisfies the logical criterion that authenticity is a function of our essential identity better than does the rival account of character over time because it allows for development and change alongside authenticity. It is easier to imagine that an aspect of one’s identity is essential in a moment than over the course of countless moments. Moreover, reflective consistency is more compatible with the meaning of authenticity than accounts that depend on radical freedom or an ungrounded self, such as we found in existentialism and postmodernism. While appealing to the concept of authenticity, these conceptions eschew the metaphysical structure of identity and truth that I attribute to authenticity. They are also inconsistent with our experiences and lead to absurd consequences. Despite our capacity for growth and change, we sense the endurance of abiding characteristics that both differentiate us from others and provide parameters within which our possibilities reside. If we gave up on the notion of identity that is at least partly beyond our control and relatively stable over time, we would cease to be able to employ the language of personality and to think about individuals as meaningful whole narratives. My account accommodates these possibilities without forsaking the freedom and openness of human experience.

A sceptic may wonder not only why we should posit constancy over multiple versions of a situation, but more fundamentally, why the different selves that are thereby
imagined should be regarded as the same self at all. In other words, if we are taking the liberty of imagining possible alternative worlds in which the same self might behave differently, what is there in the thought experiment to guarantee that we are still speaking of the same self in these parallel worlds? This line of thought might be raised by someone such as Derek Parfit, who casts doubt on the existence of personal identity by appealing to thought experiments in which what we assume to be essential to personal identity is divided and multiplied across boundaries of time and space.¹

Even if Parfit is correct that personhood can be distributed in this way, however, the objection regarding authenticity is moot. Authenticity concerns the relation of the self to itself. By multiplying the number of selves in question, one has merely deferred the question of the meaning of authenticity and multiplied the number of selves for whom authenticity is at issue. Whatever the boundaries of a “person” or a “self,” that entity can have a self-relation that may be described as authentic or not.

The imaginative exercise of finding the true self is in fact quite concrete compared with the thought experiments that appear in the personal identity literature. It begins with the real situation facing a self that has been shaped in definitive ways. (Referring to the above example, Erica is in university, it is 1994, and she has just met Ethan.) The alternatives we must consider are not actual selves subsisting in parallel realms of reality, but possibilities for choice that are plausible within the situation. (Should Erica ask Ethan out or not?) At no point do we posit the simultaneous co-existence of multiple persons known as “myself.” We recognize that despite what we may have actually chosen, there were other possibilities open to us. These speculative alternatives allow us to think about which of our reactions and

¹ See Reasons and Persons, Part III.
possibilities are coincidental and which could not have been otherwise. (No matter what she
does, she will fall in love with him.)

The kind of multiplicity of possibilities required here is therefore categorically
different from the multiplicity assumed in familiar problems of personal identity. As
mentioned in the first chapter, I am not using “personal identity” in the standard way. What
concerns me is not the definition of personhood – if and when we ever cease to be the same
person, what capacities are minimally required for personhood, and so on – but the nature of
the identity that we feel as persons – what is the self to which we relate and which seems
inextricable from our personhood. In imagining “alter-egos” that are exactly like us but
pursue different possibilities, we are not calling into question our status as continuous
persons; we are imagining what we ourselves might have done differently, given the identity
of the self we inhabited at the moment.

Another possible objection pertains to the scope of authenticity on my account, since
essential identity traits, if they exist, are probably few in number. Once we confine
authenticity to the convergence between ipse and the rare instances of idem, have we not
ruled out the possibility of authenticity in the vast majority of cases? This worry is not
insignificant, since it would seem, on my description, that in many situations there would be
nothing constant across the possibilities one faces, and hence no way of acting authentically
or inauthentically. There are two responses to this concern. First, it is important to explain
what kind of candidates for constancy I have in mind. The identity that may remain constant
across all of one’s possibilities is not only understandable in terms of significant actions or
beliefs. Any cognitive or emotional disposition that remains constant in the imaginative
alternatives could be a part of the true self. For instance, suppose that I could experience any
number of feelings following the death of a family member with whom I had a strained relationship. There are many ways I might react to this situation, given my delicate relationship to the deceased and the years of conflicting sentiments that would be stirred up at the funeral. Perhaps I would nevertheless, on every alternative, experience a certain feeling about the situation: guilty relief, frustration with myself, the urge to make amends with another family member, uneasiness about my own mortality, or something of that nature. Any of those feelings, no matter how subtle, could be a candidate for something that is truly essential to me in the moment, as long as it were constant – even if my strongest reactions (and the ones that are most obvious to others) would vary across my possibilities.

The second consideration to bring to bear is that what is essential to the self, and hence susceptible to authenticity, need not, on my account, be a simple matter of all or nothing. There may be degrees to which some aspect of my identity is essential, because, for example, while it is present across all the versions of myself I can imagine, it is not strongly present in all of them. Similarly, while something about myself might be present on all versions of a situation, it may not be something that is particularly significant to that situation; as in the above example, it may be only a minor feeling or secondary belief that holds together my possibilities. Consequently, some situations might present greater opportunities for authenticity than others; but many, if not most, situations will present an opportunity for at least a small degree of authenticity. This certainly does not rule out the possibility that in some cases there is nothing to bind together my possibilities, and hence no essential self to which I can be authentic, but such cases are likely to be rare; and in any case, the possibility of authenticity need not be a permanent possibility to be viable.
A further objection might be that, by positing the existence of any essential properties, I have ruled out the possibility of inauthenticity a priori. Once we have declared some part of personal identity to be immutable and inescapable, how can we imagine escaping it in the form of inauthenticity? Authenticity begins to look like the absence of freedom more than it does a self-possessed decision. Here we must recall the distinction drawn in the previous chapter between internal and external identity, and between disposition and behaviour. The identity traits that are hypothetically constant for a given individual may not be freely chosen, but they lead to actions which are. They are mental states, urges, desires, or beliefs that may exert an unfree hold on us but to which we can nonetheless respond with a variety of different acts. Authenticity is determined, not on the basis of the mere existence of traits that would remain constant, but on the convergence between those overlapping traits [idem] and one’s actual behaviour [ipse]. Hence if a particular desire is constant across my possibilities at a certain time, then I might be authentic by acknowledging and acting on that desire or inauthentic by ignoring or repressing it. If a certain conviction is undebatable in my mind, then I might be authentic by acting on it or inauthentic by staying passive or actively denying that I hold it. The actions here may be discernible to others or not. Just as there is always some space for differentiating between sincerity and authenticity, since the former concerns what I reveal to others and the latter concerns my relationship to myself, we can make distinctions between types of self-relationship as well. The fact that I necessarily experience or am constituted by a particular disposition does not mean that I automatically honour it in my dealings with myself and others.

5 This would mean that a person living under an oppressive regime who would face serious consequences for expressing her political views might be condemned to inauthenticity if she wishes to avoid persecution. Insofar as I do not believe in the overriding value of authenticity as against certain other values – self-preservation, for example – I do not consider this to be a negative result.
This distinction, however, might break down under certain circumstances. Consider the case of a mother running into a burning house to rescue her children, an example raised by Ishtiyaque Haji. Haji suggests that agents such as this are under “internal constraints,” which means that they are not fully autonomous: “their commitment to do what they in fact undertake to do is so strong that they cannot will to perform any alternative” (262). Hence, while these agents “act in conformity with their deepest nature, or . . . their ‘deepest self,’” their actions are coerced in such a way as to make it impossible that they could have violated this self (Haji 262). Haji’s argument raises the worry that heroic actions of this type are authentic only in a nominal way, since the possibility of inauthenticity had already been foreclosed. She claims that not only is the disposition to save the children necessary to the mother’s constitution, but so is the corresponding action: given her identity, the mother could not have done otherwise. On my account, the convergence between essential disposition and action at first blush appears to be the height of authenticity. The mother’s disposition is consistent across her possibilities and in all cases the strongest of any sensations she experiences. However, I have insisted that authenticity is only a meaningful option where inauthenticity is also a possibility. Although I could challenge Haji’s assertion that the mother literally cannot do otherwise, let us grant that she is effectively unfree, and that acting in opposition to her “true self” is impossible.6 In this case, the act of running into the burning building might be neither authentic nor inauthentic, but this is not to deny that the mother’s disposition is part of her true self. It is a part of her true self which currently functions as necessity, such as a physical limitation. Unlike a physical limitation, however, the mother had made previous choices that amounted to constituting herself in this way; this

6 Williams terms this lack of freedom an “incapacity of character” to distinguish it from those actions which an agent “simply” cannot do, because of physical as opposed to psychological hindrances (Moral Luck 129).
is why Haji describes such constraints, somewhat paradoxically, as “liberating”. Although authenticity can only be gauged in the present, our choices can have implications for our future authenticity, as well as for our future freedom.

In general, one might worry that my account describes authenticity as complacency regarding who one is rather than a positive orientation to who one wants to be. I have two responses to this concern. First, the concern is warranted: as I have parsed the concept of authenticity, it must pertain to who one already is at the time of action, and not exclusively to who one wants to be. Hence my account of what it means to be authentic relies substantially on recognizing one’s essential traits as they have been formed by the past, and in this sense it involves acceptance of who one is, for better or for worse. The existentialist accounts I surveyed, as well as other applications of “authenticity” to a strictly future-oriented normative ideal, miss this necessary grounding. They may have greater ethical appeal, since they inspire us to identify with traits that we may not yet have but would like to. However, this is not the core meaning of authenticity. My second response is that my account nonetheless accommodates some of our interest in self-improvement and transcending the person we already are. The recognition of essential characteristics need not confine us exclusively to rehearsing our existing identities at the expense of new and better ones. On the contrary, recognizing and coming to terms with our most intractable qualities can be indispensable for identifying those qualities we would rather embody and strategizing about how to do so.7

A related objection to my account may concern the potential value of acting in inauthentic ways, so as to force ourselves to confront new situations and expand the boundaries of one’s self-conception. It might appear that the character-building experience

7 See my example about jealousy, below.
of trying new things is inauthentic, or at least neutral, on my view, since it will often involve eschewing choices that are familiar and constant across all one’s possibilities. On the contrary, I believe that reflective consistency can account for the value of trying new things in at least two ways. First, it could be the case that the disposition to expose oneself to new possibilities or pursue options that feel foreign is itself a constant part of one’s identity, and hence worthy of being honoured in the name of authenticity. There are individuals who crave adventure and will select the most exotic of their possibilities while their friends content themselves with the familiar. Such individuals may not be authentic if we are looking for consistency across their first-order choices, but they might be authentic with respect to the consistency of their thirst for novelty. For instance, imagine that Anne wants to study abroad and is given a choice between spending a year in Japan, France, or Australia. She chooses Japan because it is the most exotic. However, if Japan were not an option, she would still choose whichever of the options was to her the most foreign. It is not the case that she has an essential desire to study in Japan; rather, she has an essential desire to immerse herself in as foreign a culture as possible. Although the specific choices in a situation will not be constant across all versions of it, the instinct to try new things might be. This is another example of a meta-belief or feeling being constant as opposed to a first-order choice or preference.

Not everyone is like Anne, however. While we may tout the value of forcing oneself into uncomfortable situations from time to time, we should not assume that it always stems from an authentic yen for novelty. Still, we need not retract our endorsement of these Foucauldian boundary situations. The benefit of this seemingly forced inauthenticity may be that it helps to illuminate what is or is not part of the true self – insight that we could not
have gained without pursuing the unlikely choice. An episode of Being Erica explores this theme. Erica describes a relationship that ended when she declined to participate in her boyfriend’s vampire LARP – Live Action Role Playing – an organized fantasy game in which adults dress up as and assume the identity of vampires in a complex political order. Erica claims that such entertainment “just isn’t me” and consequently that she was justified in bowing out of the evening – and her relationship. When her therapist sends her back in time and encourages her to participate in the LARP, Erica is uncomfortable and unsure of herself, but she ultimately lets down her defences and inhabits the role of a sorceress-vampire for a few hours. She still breaks up with her boyfriend, and she still declines to be converted to the niche underworld of LARPing. However the experience of pushing her boundaries, and specifically of choosing a possibility that is by no means consistent across her alternatives (indeed, of conquering a feeling of discomfort that was consistent), both strengthens her intuitions about her true self and illustrates that she has greater potential for adjusting to new circumstances than she gave herself credit for. She shows that the occasional act of inauthenticity might well lay the ground for greater authenticity. As popular wisdom has it, you have to try different things to know what you like.

I have shown how the reflective consistency view resists succumbing to several serious objections and has advantages over other views I have discussed. Whereas some accounts of authenticity decline to identify what is essential to the self, the structure of the concept depends on the existence of a factual oasis amid the sea of changing elements of selfhood. My account indicates wherein this constancy may be found without diminishing the temporal, dialogical, or open-ended possibilities of selfhood. Second, the account avoids the assumption of multiple selves but allows for the possibility of both authenticity and
inauthenticity within the same individual at each moment. Previous accounts that I reviewed failed to provide this kind of theoretical distinction. Finally, despite turning the basis of authenticity into something necessary, the reflective consistency view shows that authenticity does not imply a lack of freedom: we can act in accordance with our essential selves or not, and it may be just as valuable at times to do the latter as it is to do the former. In articulating this account I have avoided both the pitfall of caricaturing the self as a divided entity neatly split between “true” and “false,” as well as the trap of putting all identity traits in the same category and eviscerating the usefulness of the notion of authenticity altogether. Moreover, I take myself to have explicated the meaning of authenticity without recourse to jargon or mysticism.

IV. Act Naturally

Having attempted to defend my view of authenticity from several objections, I want to re-open a number of considerations that have arisen throughout the course of my analysis and demonstrate how the reflective consistency model provides intuitive answers to them. One of our primary questions has been how to differentiate authenticity from inauthenticity, and more specifically, how to explain our intuition that blind conformity, posing, and pretending are types of inauthenticity. The view in question can explain this by showing that the motives that lead us to conform, pose, and pretend are usually contingent ones. We do all these things in order to impress or fit in with a particular social group at a particular point in time. If we imagined being confronted with a different social group or different cultural expectations, we could see that our behaviour would change accordingly. This suggests that my desire to do whatever it is that will pass for “cool” or acceptable in a given situation is
entirely derivative of that situation, and not indicative of a desire that is native to my identity (except the desire to pass for “cool”). We regard as inauthentic behaviour that is obviously tailored to an ad hoc social situation because it tells us little or nothing about the individual, namely how that individual would act in a different situation.

As I suggested earlier, however, being non-conformist is not necessarily authentic either. The litmus test for authentic behaviour is not whether it contrasts with the behaviour of others – of the they – but whether it converges with a disposition that is inseparable from the individual. Consider again the example of Marilyn, who spoke out against a business that employed sweatshop labour. If she would be convinced of the wrongness of supporting this business both in an atmosphere where her view was the majority view, and one in which she was the sole voice of conscience, then we can say that her conviction expressed something true about herself. But if she would be convinced of the majority view, or opposed to the majority view on principle, regardless of what the majority said, then she would not have an essential disposition on the matter. She could be neither authentic nor inauthentic with respect to this situation.  

Notice that Marilyn’s “essential” attitude toward sweatshop labour does not mean that she cannot help but behave authentically. There is still a distinction to be drawn between Marilyn’s conviction and Marilyn’s behaviour. If, across all possible iterations of the situation, her conviction remained the same, then we could say that it was her authentic

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8 Milgram’s famous psychology experiments are certainly disquieting evidence of this absence of authenticity. For example, when a subject was asked to indicate which of two obviously different sticks was longer, but a line-up of ten actors unanimously chose the shorter one, the subject tended to say that he concurred with the majority, despite the fact that the same subject, in private, would choose the other stick one hundred percent of the time. Unfortunately, this study showed that under the right circumstances, nearly everyone would abandon their most strongly held convictions. However, as I argued above, authenticity could be measured with respect to many different dispositions. While the subjects displayed a lack of convergence between their answers and their independent assessment of the study question, they may have acted authentically with respect to other things: the commitment to being cooperative study subjects, a sense of humility about their opinions, or something of that nature.
disposition. But she might nonetheless, on some iterations, hide her views from others. She may lie about what she thinks, or even attempt to convince herself that she thinks otherwise, because a pro-business stance would be more expedient. If so, she would be behaving inauthentically.

Arguably there are some people who are always conformist. In every possible situation, they tailor their behaviour to whatever is perceived to be the most acceptable or popular. We might say, curiously, that conformity is one of their essential dispositions and it is authentic for them to live up to it. This is particularly so if they have no rival opinions that are belied by their conformity – if they are merely indifferent. In such a case we must say that it is in fact authentic for such an individual to behave in conformity with others, at least until she outgrows that disposition and acquires convictions of her own. To recall, authenticity is not a measure of originality, and inauthenticity is not necessarily coextensive with the absence of originality. However, conformity, like most attitudes and behaviours, may be replaced by others in time.

The reflective consistency view buttresses the intuition that pure performance and conformity are usually inauthentic, just as we suspected. But we also examined subtler scenarios in which the line between the true self and the self’s behaviour are less distinct. One challenge was brought forward by Judith Butler, who argued that the self is essentially performative, so that it is nonsensical to search for a self that would subsist behind alternative performative opportunities. This strikes me as wrong because, as mentioned earlier, something has to give rise to the choices expressed in the self’s performance, and the only reasonable candidate for this source is something particular about the individual. This implies that even if nothing were to remain constant across one’s behaviour in various
iterations of some situation, in each case the behaviour would still be meaningfully attributed to the self in question. Selfhood is an interaction between certain possibilities that an individual brings to a situation and the influences introduced by the situation that shape the self’s raw materials into something more specific. The question of authenticity depends on whether any of these raw materials – things that the individual brings to the situation – are sufficiently constitutive of the person that they would be always be present if that person were in that situation. Butler’s view implies that nothing about identity is genuinely immutable, and if it turned out that some aspect of oneself remained constant in different performative spaces, this would be purely coincidental. So Butler’s position seems to be no more threatening to this particular view of authenticity than it was to the notion of selfhood in general.

V. Conflicts within the Self

In considering Frankfurt’s theory of wholeheartedness, we saw that it is persuasive to think of authenticity as something like the fulfillment of desires, but where only one’s deepest, or “wholehearted,” desires should be honoured. This makes sense because desires issue from a very personal, usually uncontrollable part of the self, and are often immune to external corruption; they therefore seem to give us information about who someone is. Frankfurt argues that wholeheartedness is a condition of full identification with one’s desires and all higher-order desires implied by them: the complete absence of equivocality or ambivalence. We saw how this standard of wholeheartedness might be both forbiddingly high as well as emotionally unhealthy, because of the need to regard certain desires as foreign when they are still very much internal to the self. On the reflective consistency
theory, the criterion of consistent desires is retained, but the consistency to be achieved is not across “orders” of desire, but across the desires we would have in every possible version of the situation. I can be said to “really want” something – that is, my desire can be regarded as essential – if there is no version of the situation on which I would lack that desire. Hence acting on the desire is authentic, and ignoring it is inauthentic. This view is more succinct and less question-begging than Frankfurt’s in two ways.

First, any desire on any order can be hypothetically essential. The desire need not be consistent with every other desire I have, which, as I argued earlier, is unlikely to happen. If, in every situation I can imagine, I would have the desire to please my mother, then even when that desire is at odds with other desires, I know that it is part of my essential disposition. If my desire to please my mother would not always be present, but it happens to be in this case, then I may fulfill it or not; but it is not inauthentic simply in virtue of being non-essential. This is a simpler criterion than the wholeheartedness criterion. Second, this does not require me to expel desires that are inconsistent with the target desire from my self-definition. Even the desires that might not remain constant in every conceivable version of myself are part of who I am; they are just not an essential part. It is normal for humans to experience desires that shift, disappear, or come into conflict with other desires. Such ambivalence is not necessarily inauthentic; nor do the apparently rogue desires need to be regarded as foreign, as Frankfurt suggests. I can still “identify” with them, even if they are sparked by contingent circumstances or are inconsistent with more fundamental desires.

Hence another virtue of the reflective consistency account is that it avoids the pitfall of declaring all one’s traits and choices to be either authentic (part of oneself) or inauthentic (not really part of oneself), as literal essentialism would suggest. It incorporates the intuition
that everything we feel, think, and ultimately do is a part of ourselves, at least in the trivial way that it issues from something within us and is attributed to us as agents. But it reserves the possibility of authentic behaviour with respect to those traits that are necessary or essential to ourselves. Conversely, inauthenticity is a kind of betrayal of those constitutive facts, manifested in behaviour that conflicts with them. Inauthenticity still should not be regarded as the workings of a foreign self; we are still “ourselves” when we are being inauthentic. We are inauthentic inasmuch as we deny or fail to act on what is most true about ourselves, but the remainder – while perhaps “less true” – is still a function of the self.

Another type of conflict within the self that arose in my investigation of act and character was the challenge of promise-keeping. Capturing the frustrating lack of synchronicity between selfhood and temporality, Ricoeur points to the experience of not wanting to fulfill a promise that was made in the past because of developments in the self in the interim (118). In such a situation, which course of action is authentic: honouring the commitment of a past version of myself, or betraying that self in favour of a present disposition? While the practical challenge remains poignant, on my account of authenticity the question is actually moot. Because authenticity is always defined with respect to my possibilities in a present situation, the promise-keeping question is about not one, but two distinct scenarios. In the first instance, whether or not my making the promise is authentic depends on considerations exclusive to that moment. When it comes time for the promise to be fulfilled, the question of authenticity is not, “Should I be true to my past self?” but rather, “What constitutes truthfulness to myself right now, as judged by what, if anything, is consistent among my possibilities?” My possibilities will naturally take into account the fact that I previously committed myself to fulfilling the promise in question, since my identity in

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9 This includes psychological behaviour, such as denial or repression.
the present incorporates my past; however it is impossible to establish a priori to what extent that past fact will affect my current state of mind. It might turn out that the disposition to fulfil my promise – despite a change of heart – is essential to me at that moment, or it might not. Either way, authenticity does not require me to forge artificial consistency between my identities at disparate moments in time. Other conflicts involving changes in the self over time, such as reconciling apparent changes in character, are likewise dispelled by the reflective consistency view. This is not to say that they present no interesting or serious questions about personal identity and practical reason; however they need not be solved by a theory of authenticity that seeks to locate the true self.

VI. Consequences of the Reflective Consistency Account

Having sketched a new account of authenticity and considered how it would explain some of the problems we have come across, let us take stock of the implications of this account.

First, it is impossible to tell whether another person is authentic or inauthentic. Owing to the reflective and perspectival structure of selfhood, an outsider may contribute to but never adjudicate the process of assessing one’s true self. Interestingly, while this result might be at odds with colloquial uses of authenticity talk, it is consistent with the contributions of Heidegger and, in principle, Sartre. Heidegger describes authenticity as a phenomenological possibility for Dasein which not only entails, but might existentially depend on, Dasein’s separation from others. Despite my concerns about Heidegger’s account of authenticity, this aspect remained plausible throughout my discussion; I showed how authenticity cannot be simply reduced to an empirical measure or behaviour that can be recognized by others. Sartre does not comment on the possibility of recognizing another
person’s authenticity, but he does believe in – and practise – the possibility of judging another person to be in bad faith, as the waiter example shows. As argued in Chapter 3, as long as authenticity and bad faith are understood properly as internal psychical states, such judgment is unwarranted. However authenticity is cashed out, it makes sense that it is a phenomenological or otherwise subjectively created and evaluated state that may not be reliably assessed by others.

On my account, authenticity can only be assessed from a first-person perspective, but moreover, the content of authenticity must itself be determined from such a perspective. There is no further fact about what would be constant across my possibilities apart from what I reflectively consider to be constant from a particular temporal vantage point. Through the process of assessing my true self, I give shape and substance to the only truth a self can ever have. The truth to which authenticity responds, and which I have insisted repeatedly is absent or elusive in other accounts, amounts to this hermeneutic, non-propositional notion. Hence, while personal authenticity shares with other applications of authenticity the task of truth-telling, the markers and measures of this task will be distinct in the former case. In virtue of the way selves are inherently dynamic and subjective, we will never achieve in personal identity the criteria of truth that we can expect with reference to a pearl, or a building with a retro design, whose history can always be confirmed empirically. Selfhood is not empirically legible, even to the first-person interpreter. Yet the first-person perspective is the only one through which a conception of true selfhood may emerge. My account of authenticity indicates what types of consistency and convergence within the self should be looked for, as well as the type of self-reflection that is built into such a self-assessment, but not whether another person has accurately carried out these tasks. This may invite the charge
that my account, like those I criticized, is purely formal and leaves the meaning of authenticity dangerously subjective and general. Unlike other accounts, however, I have been explicit about the features of the true self without purporting to pre-determine what it looks like in each case. Authenticity should always be connected with truth – even the non-propositional truth of personal identity – and not with infinite indeterminacy.

Although my account departs from the existentialist view of authenticity in obvious ways, it retains the Heideggerian insight that finitude informs our choices and our self-understanding. However, it is not temporal finitude – death – that is featured on this view. Rather, I have hinged my defence of authenticity on the finitude of one’s possibilities qua self, which is in its own right a contradiction of existentialism. One may not be simply anybody, within the constraints of birth, death, and circumstantial facticity, as both Heidegger and Sartre argue. Finitude of possibilities informs the very notion of selfhood; without it, we could not speak of an enduring entity called the self. Authenticity is not exercising our freedom to be different from ourselves, but acting in accordance with what is most inescapable about ourselves. Oddly, then, what might be inauthentic on Heidegger’s or Sartre’s account could well be considered authentic on mine. Authenticity in existentialism, while described as “being oneself,” depends on moving away from what is familiar, recurring, and apparently necessary about oneself, whereas I describe authenticity as a rapprochement between the self and its fundamental traits. This means that an attempt to blend in with others – the they – is almost certainly inauthentic according to Heidegger and Sartre, but potentially authentic according to the reflective consistency view. Likewise, because Heidegger and Sartre provide little guidance about choosing authentically, it could turn out that what a person settles on once she has taken stock of her ontological status is
something quite arbitrary, which would not be consistent across all versions of herself. On my view, by contrast, an arbitrary or reflectively inconsistent choice, while not necessarily inauthentic, cannot be authentic.

In fact, another outcome of this account is that there will often be no opportunity for authenticity or inauthenticity with respect to most elements of our identity. Most situations will arouse at least one reaction or disposition that would be consistent across all our possibilities; this is attested to by our strong sensibilities about what is possible or not possible for ourselves, about what distinguishes us from other people, and about how we would react in hypothetical scenarios. But even if several things were essential to our identity in a certain situation, this means that countless others would not be essential. There would be no way of being authentic or inauthentic with regard to them. This seems like a realistic result: the vast majority of our desires, instincts, and beliefs are not cemented in our identity by past experience or biological destiny. Even if they occur frequently, we cannot say that they necessarily form a part of our identity at one moment. It also follows that some individuals might simply have fewer opportunities for authenticity than others because their identities are more open-ended: they can imagine very little consistency among their range of possibilities. This shows that the lack of authenticity, or the lack of opportunities for authenticity, is not a character defect. Indeed, those who might be admonished for being stubborn, closed-minded, or very set in their ways might have the best claim on a “true self” to which they can be authentic, because there will be less variation in their reactions to the world, whereas “free spirits,” adventurers, and highly adaptive people might have fewer opportunities for authenticity because of their self’s malleability.
Because I conceive of authenticity as a particular exercise that must be consciously undertaken, there is no moment or activity that serves to illuminate the self to itself and clear the path for authenticity. It makes little sense to speak of a “call of conscience,” which is uncontrollable and obscure, when authenticity is a particular kind of convergence that can be thought about deliberately, and which must be followed up with the appropriate kind of behaviour. Moreover, authenticity is not an on-or-off state that can be triggered by the appropriate switch. Therefore, similar notions of a “switch” to authenticity – Sartre’s “conversion,” Taylor’s “epiphany” – are equally at odds with my account. There may come a moment when one first chooses to reflect upon the true self, but this reflection alone does not signal any type of revelation or conversion. Sartre is correct that “[t]he instant that arrives is novel, the situation is novel: a new authenticity has to be invented,” because the content of one’s authenticity changes from moment to moment (War Diaries 219). But there is no particular moment when authenticity first becomes a possibility, or is first definitively achieved.

Not only is there no moment when authenticity takes over, but also there is no age at which one may become susceptible to authenticity or inauthenticity. Everyone is in principle always capable of authenticity, since there is always a self with features that could be necessary or not. Of course, authenticity is still unlikely to become an issue until a child is at least old enough to reflect on these aspects of selfhood. My view is incompatible with the idea, propounded by psychoanalyst Alice Miller, that “[w]e find our true nature writ small but clear in our childhood lives” (Guignon, On Being Authentic 87). Authenticity is not about returning to origins or stagnating at a particular, ostensibly “pure,” moment of development. As the existentialists believed, authenticity depends crucially upon the self
unfolding and growing over time; but it corresponds to definitive aspects of the self in the present rather than to formal capacities for change and self-determination.

It may be the case that some individuals lack either the requisite cognitive powers to ponder their true self, or the richness of alternatives needed to make significant an authentic choice. Individuals with several mental disabilities or certain psychological illnesses will likely be excluded from the full possibility of authenticity, and this seems an acceptable result. Perhaps more controversially, on my account it seems that even some healthy adults will lack the critical self-awareness and analytic or reflective ability to determine what is essential to their identities. I previewed this scenario in my earlier discussion of Forrest Gump. It is doubtful that Gump could imagine himself in all his possibilities and separate his essential from his accidental dispositions, as authenticity requires. What I characterized earlier as simply “self-knowledge” may now be filled out with the particular demands of authentic self-reflection: one who lacks self-knowledge is unable to achieve authenticity in this sense. Nonetheless, just as the sincerity of one who lacks self-knowledge will be a thinner virtue than the sincerity of a highly self-reflective person, authenticity clearly admits of degrees. Gump can attempt to reflect on his true self to the extent that his mental capacities allow; doing so will afford him some access to authenticity, and while we might prize this outcome less highly than the authenticity of a truly complex, cerebral person, we must not exclude it wholesale from the category. The depth and value of authenticity, as well as of the self-knowledge that precedes it, will vary with the reflective and interpretive abilities of the individual (and, indeed, the complexity of the individual’s character).

There is no answer built into this account about how long a person can be authentic for, nor whether authenticity can apply to a life as a whole. This might be an unfortunate
result but it follows from the conclusions I drew in Chapter 5 about the instability of character and the unpredictability of the self’s evolution over the lifespan. For the same reason that I argue that the true self must be viewed in a moment-to-moment snapshot, the possibility of lasting essential characteristics is ruled out: persons are not like inanimate objects or scientific categories that have immutable core properties. One could, in theory, imagine the self at the end of one’s life, using the same method I propose for thinking about a specific situation, and search for consistency among all of one’s possibilities in large categories of situations. But in addition to being vastly more difficult to conceive than the moment-to-moment consistency, it is doubtful that consistency in this broad context would be remotely desirable; why would I want my life to be authentic if this corresponded to stagnancy over decades of experience? I suggest that in considering long periods of time or a whole lifespan, we should use not authenticity but different notions to think about personal identity and self-fulfillment. Some concepts are better equipped to track trends over time and virtues of personal choice without reducing one’s identity to a matter of essential properties that resist growth or change. In removing authenticity from this category, I am deliberately calling into question the scope and value of authenticity as a guideline for how to live. Because I consider authenticity to be limited to consistency with the true self in particular situations, its value might be narrower than most others have supposed. I will now consider that value in more detail.

VII. The Value of Authenticity

Part of the impetus to work out a plausible explanation of authenticity is to be able to better adjudicate our conviction that we ought to be authentic. Despite disagreements and
confusion about the content of authenticity, everyone seems to agree that it is a good thing to strive for. Now that I have presented an account of what, in fact, authenticity means, I will explain why I think it is considered to be so valuable and the status of my conception of authenticity as a normative ideal.

Frankfurt argues that we cannot help but value truth if we wish to navigate the world successfully. Leaving aside the epistemological problem of how to verify what we regard as truth, he insists that the very notion of truth as a possibility is essential to our functioning: “Without truth, either we have no opinion at all concerning how things are or our opinion is wrong. One way or the other, we do not know what kind of situation we are in. We don’t know what’s going on, either in the world around us or within ourselves” (Frankfurt, On Truth 59). Hence we need some anchor, some candidates for truth, in order to get through our lives. Particularly important are metaphysical truths, “the properties of reality, and accordingly the truths about its properties” (Frankfurt, On Truth 54). Without beliefs about the enduring nature of certain important features of our world, we would be reduced to scepticism or paralysis, as Hume showed. Rationality depends upon a distinction between truth or reality and falsity, as well as our ability to communicate with one another about what falls into each group. As Frankfurt says, “false statements provide no rational support for anything; they cannot effectively serve anyone as reasons” (On Truth 64). We need ideas about truth in order to make decisions and exercise our basic capacities as rational beings.

As we have seen, authenticity purports to track a particularly important reality – the truth about who we are. Inauthenticity is usually condemned on the grounds that it constitutes lying, not just about states of the world, but about that most personal and significant topic of all: ourselves. This is the case even when the truth about who we are is
revealed to be offensive or distasteful, or when the content of our inauthenticity is pleasing. As an anonymous saying goes, “It is better to be hated for who you are than loved for who you’re not.” Our enthusiasm for authenticity is a function of our interest in the reality it claims to represent. Verisimilitude is often valued even more highly than other social goods, such as popularity or even justice and generosity. Frankfurt’s analysis of truth explains why this is so. If we believe that we are being deceived about who someone is, we lose our ability to make informed choices about how to live. We cannot confidently relate to others without some sense that they are representing themselves truthfully. This helps to explain the overwhelming cultural emphasis on sincerity. But the problem is compounded when we misrepresent ourselves to ourselves. How can we make informed decisions, think sensibly through problems, or enjoy calm and certitude if we deny our true identity to ourselves? As Frankfurt notes, it is equally if not more important to feel that we have accurately discerned the truth about ourselves than it is to acquire knowledge of others:

We need to recognize what it is that we really want, what will most fully satisfy us, and what anxieties most intrinsically block us from acting as we would like. Genuine self-knowledge is, no doubt, exceptionally difficult to attain, and the truth about what we are may certainly be distressing. In our efforts to conduct our lives successfully, however, a readiness to face disturbing facts about ourselves may be an even more critical asset than a competent understanding merely of what we are up against in the outside world. (On Truth 58-59)

The combination of self-knowledge and self-confrontation Frankfurt alludes to is constitutive of authenticity. Using the same logic as he did to explain the value of truth with respect to outside reality, he argues that we could not manoeuvre successfully through our lives without
respect for internal truth as well. This explains why we value authenticity even when we discover “distressing” facts about ourselves: we can proceed better with an accurate yet distressing picture than we can with a pleasant yet false one. Reality must prevail, however disagreeable it may be.

The explanatory force of Frankfurt’s analysis hinges on the usefulness of truth – whether internal or external – in the pursuit of other goods, such as living a safe and fulfilling life. He therefore shows why authenticity has instrumental value, along with sincerity and other activities that accurately represent reality. However, many proponents of authenticity have believed its value to be intrinsic rather than instrumental. For the Romantics, for instance, the importance of living an authentic life is related to my non-substitutable value as a once-occurring person, whose possibilities could never be actualized by someone else. As Herder argued, “[t]here is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s” (Taylor, Ethics 28-29).

Herder’s view is characteristic of those held by other Romantics, for whom authenticity was a subjective and self-justifying enterprise. The value of authenticity, for them, derives from a world view according to which each person has a unique role to fill in the universe. Much aside from the external goods that authenticity might afford me or others, it is clear how this orientation to my life’s purpose would make it all the more necessary to strive for authenticity.

There is also a further sense in which the value of authenticity is intrinsic, according to conventional views: being authentic means being impervious to, or at least thinking critically about, artificial social expectations, and hence results in exercising greater freedom. This freedom is usually valued for its own sake, and authenticity may become synonymous

with it: “Authenticity is itself an idea of freedom; it involves my finding the design of my life myself, against the demands of external conformity” (Taylor, Ethics 67-8). Dworkin also argues that without authenticity, we cannot be fully autonomous, and autonomy “is a capacity that we have a responsibility to exercise” (32). While Taylor warns against the valorization of unbridled freedom, he agrees that its appeal is explanatory of the appeal of authenticity. As long as the true self is described in contradistinction to conformity and unreflective cultural norms, authenticity is causally dependent on being a free, self-fulfilling, original human being, which in Western modernity has never been regarded as anything less than one of life’s ultimate goals.

In existentialism the connection between authenticity and freedom is taken to its logical extreme. Authenticity is unhinged from determinate or uncontrolled identity traits and transmuted into the creation of one’s own self. Although Heidegger denies that authenticity is a normative ideal for Dasein, Being and Time reads like an exhortation to become authentic for the intrinsic good of living this way. Sartre states unambiguously that one ought to strive for authenticity in order to actualize the possibilities for being that we uniquely (as humans, not as individuals) possess. The value of being a free, self-creating individual is presumed on both accounts, and according to both philosophers, authenticity is inseparable from truth. For Heidegger, authenticity is Dasein’s mode of being that allows being to disclose itself, and for Sartre, authenticity constitutes the truth of being-for-itself.

On all conceptions of authenticity’s meaning, then, it is easy to see why it has always been lauded as a positive, even necessary, ideal to strive for. Whether the value of authenticity is described in instrumental or intrinsic terms, it achieves this status in virtue of

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10 “In the end, authenticity can’t, shouldn’t, go all the way with self-determining freedom. It undercuts itself. Yet the temptation is understandably there” (Taylor, Ethics 68).
its relationship to a presumed theory of truth. We want to know the truth about the world and about ourselves, however tenuously such metaphysical facts can be accessed, and authenticity purports to represent these truths. The value of authenticity is not absolute, however, because it frequently comes into conflict with other values, not the least of which is behaving ethically. As Taylor, Levinas, Adorno, and many others have observed, there is no necessary relationship between authenticity and morality, leading to the conundrum that we have to praise Claudius for his authenticity in spite of his villainy. Indeed, we must question whether being oneself is an unconditional virtue when we are confronted with examples of true selves that are fundamentally heinous. There is nothing in the ideal of being oneself that guarantees that the self one should be is a good one.

The authors we have surveyed deal with the discomfiting conflict between authenticity and morality in different ways. Some, such as Adorno, reject authenticity altogether, decrying the fact that “in the name of contemporary authenticity even a torturer could put in all sorts of claims for compensation, to the extent that he was simply a true torturer” (125). To Adorno’s mind, the excessive zeal for self-identity overlooks the important distinction between a thing being itself and a thing being good, which is in no way remediable within the vocabulary of authenticity. Taylor is more optimistic, arguing that not only can the value of authenticity cede to other values as necessary, but moreover, that authenticity itself must be defined in terms of the value of devoting oneself to a horizon of significance (Ethics 66). This should minimize the conflicts that have resulted in authenticity serving as an alibi for all sorts of relativism and disregard for the needs of others.

My account includes no structural ethical standards the way Taylor’s does: the process of reflecting on one’s essential traits will serve a villain just as well as a hero.
Claudius, for example, is not only wholehearted in Frankfurt’s sense but very likely authentic in mine, yet the identity he deems to be essential to himself is unethical by any standard. Whether authenticity and morality frequently diverge in this way, or whether practising the former is more likely to promote the latter, depends on one’s beliefs about the nature of humanity, which I cannot presume to discuss here. What is clear is that my account rejects any alignment between authenticity and morality defended on the grounds that the former derives from something “uncorrupted” and “natural,” as Rousseau declares. Not only should we be sceptical in principle about the artificial opposition between nature and civilization that he puts forward, but authenticity itself seems to be no more indicative of one than the other. The essential self could be largely determined, on my account, by cultural influences that are inherited and internalized.

The appropriate response to the unfortunate asymmetry between authenticity and morality is not to deny that anyone can or should be authentic, as Adorno does, but to balance the value of authenticity with other values to which we should aspire. Given the choice between an authentic villain and an inauthentic hero\textsuperscript{11}, we might legitimately prefer the latter as a leader or a friend. For ourselves, more importantly, discovering that our “true self” is flawed might provide us with an impetus to change it for the better. This move depends on authenticity being different from Frankfurt’s wholeheartedness. Imagine, for example, that upon honest reflection I discover that I am jealous of a certain friend. Consistent though this jealousy may be across my possibilities, I have a higher-order volition to not be jealous, because I regard this feeling as petty and unjust. In Frankfurt’s terminology I am not wholehearted because of the mismatch between my volition and my

\textsuperscript{11} By “inauthentic hero” I do not mean someone who masquerades as a hero but is in actual fact a villain; this would defeat the point of the comparison. Rather, I am thinking of someone who does the right thing accidentally, or with compunctions, instead of feeling that the disposition to do so is essential to himself.
will; but my jealousy is nonetheless essential, since it persists as a first-order feeling. Now, authenticity demands that I own up to this jealousy by refusing to disguise it as something else in my thoughts or actions. In effect I might be required to act jealously in order to be authentic – an apparently vicious prescription. Yet this confrontation with my true self might serve precisely to urge a transformation of the feeling I regard as shameful, and eventually render it inessential to my emotional landscape.\footnote{12} Then my future authentic possibilities would exclude behaving jealously toward someone I cherish.

The concern that praising authenticity may inadvertently lead to praising vice cannot be diffused by my account, because authenticity and virtue are distinct categories, but there is promise of narrowing the distance between the two. Moreover, the question of authenticity’s value primarily concerns its structure of self-truthfulness as such, and not any specific actions it yields. Authenticity promotes and deepens other ideals we value, such as truth and sincerity, and Frankfurt is correct that attending to these will have practical benefits. The two dominant explanations offered for the intrinsic value of authenticity are, however, mutually contradictory. Authenticity cannot simultaneously mean to “be who one already is,” as the strict essentialist version has it, and to fashion oneself freely into any person one wishes to become, as the existentialist and popular accounts of authenticity endorse.\footnote{13} On the former authenticity is valuable because it is good to be who I really am, as determined by God, nature, destiny, or whatever other force accounts for these things, whereas on the latter authenticity is valuable because nothing can determine who I really am except for myself. My conceptual analysis of authenticity explains why the essentialist meaning is closer to the metaphysical structure demanded by authenticity, while my analysis of selfhood shows the

\[\text{footnote text here}\]
limitations of the essentialist model and the need to consult existentialist or other modern perspectives on the self. The result is that authenticity as imagined selfhood may be intrinsically valuable in neither way, or that it may be somewhat valuable in both ways: it is good to be who I am (after all, who else should I be?), but it is also good to make myself into who I want to be, or at least to choose how I live. It is less valuable to try to be someone else, or to remain indifferent to or ignorant of my own capacity for self-determination. There seems little point to living my life this way so long as authenticity is an option. Both the strict essentialist and the existentialist views are right to this extent.

Authenticity as reflective consistency emphasizes different aspects of how one ought to live than the Romantics and the existentialists. Central to my account are the activities of self-reflection and analysis, without which the true self is not only unknown but effectively non-existent: there is no mind-independent fact about who I am. Indeed, the value of authenticity may reside more in its pre-conditions than in its actual execution. “Being myself” – acting in accordance with what I have determined to be essential to me – might be no great feat in itself, as Adorno suspected. Self-identity as such presents no particular cause for celebration or alarm. But self-knowledge, such as the kind I have described, might be a rare phenomenon indeed. Foucault notes that in the ancient world, “know thyself” was the paramount ethical rule, whereas in the modern world “be thyself” is the first commandment. On my account, the priority has been reversed again. The value of authenticity derives mostly from the value of knowing oneself, that is, of undertaking a thoughtful, honest, and analytic assessment of one’s constitutive identity traits. Acting in conformity with one’s true self may have value or disvalue; but knowing one’s true self is an unconditional good.
EPILOGUE

EVEN BETTER THAN THE REAL THING

We have come to accept that authenticity deserves our unconditional approval and that inauthenticity is generally a fault. My account suggests that these judgments are too simple. Although it might be desirable or virtuous to be authentic most of the time, there might be various reasons why not actualizing those consistent traits could be valuable for separate reasons. For instance, if being oneself would result in political persecution or other social consequences, one would have a good reason to eschew authenticity and pretend to be someone she is not. For this reason I see no justification for condemning gays who are in the closet, clandestine opponents of totalitarian regimes, persecuted religious minorities who practise their faith in secrecy, and countless others who are technically inauthentic for the sake of other goods. We might consider these individuals more courageous, and potential catalysts of social progress, if they acted authentically, but it is no individual’s responsibility to martyr himself for the good of society or for the sake of living up to his true identity.

There might also be value in not being oneself for the simple social benefits and experience it brings. In Chapter 6 I considered role-playing and shtick as examples of modified authenticity or partial inauthenticity that most of us regularly embody. At some point or another we will all cultivate a certain persona that makes use of, but is not strictly limited to, the content of our true self. In addition, we will probably choose to step outside of what we take to be consistent among our possibilities once in a while for the simple adventure of stretching our self-conception, as Erica did when she participated in the vampire LARP. While these experiences are inauthentic on my definition, they lack the more
unsavoury characteristics of inauthenticity that typically lead us to condemn it. Nobody is harmed through these experiments, especially in a social context where this degree of self-construction and pretence is expected. And Frankfurt’s concern that we will become disoriented and unable to make rational choices without an unwavering regard for truth is likewise disarmed by the context in which this inauthenticity occurs; deliberate, temporary experiments with one’s true self present no serious threat to our understanding of the world, or others’ understanding of us. These examples of selective inauthenticity or insincerity are to be distinguished from thoroughgoing and categorical dissimulation, such as the behaviour of impostors like Tartuffe, as well as the genuine absence of self-knowledge seen in characters such as Forrest Gump or the severely mentally ill. Both these types of inauthenticity can lead to disastrous consequences for oneself and others.

On the account of authenticity as reflective consistency, we can see how authenticity is valuable in principle but its value can be trumped by other considerations. Moreover, even inauthenticity can be valuable in its own right. This accords with my initial observations about the use of authenticity in the realm of inanimate things. Although we generally prefer, and charge more money for, artefacts that come from the proper source, there is still a huge market for inauthentic artefacts. As popular wisdom has it, “every fake something is a real something else.” Fake pearls exist because people are willing to pay money for them while knowing full well that they are not real. In fact, recent fashion trends have instigated a conspicuous reappropriation of costume jewellery, including unrealistically large plastic pearls and imitation gemstones – genuine fakes with their own standards of truthfulness and value. Indeed, in this case we might conclude that the more conspicuously inauthentic a thing is, the more it is to be valued for its inauthenticity. While clearly mimetic of authentic
pearls, fake ones can have their own merit. Likewise, diluted ethnic cuisine that might be
criticized by some for its inauthenticity has found huge popularity among others who
appreciate it for its very hybridity: Tex-Mex, American-Chinese and American-Italian food
are examples. Diners are also popular even when no one is under the illusion that they are
original, and imitation works by the great classical artists still fetch enormous sums of
money. Louis Vuitton handbag knock-offs are apparently the most widely manufactured
copy in the world.

This type of accepted inauthenticity shows that in settling for a substitute reality –
whether because the genuine article is too rare or too expensive to procure – a new reality is
created. In some areas we value conspicuously inauthentic articles for their own sake as a
species of kitsch or a subversion of conventional values. The statement made by wearing re-
issued retro clothing or costume jewellery is not necessarily, or not simply, “I can’t afford
otherwise,” but often, “I defy you to tell me why this is worse than the original.” For various
reasons, the original thing that we sought to imitate might even give way to its imitation in
our cultural hierarchy of goods. Synthetic materials that were invented to give the illusion of
leather, for example, are now often priced more highly than and preferred over real leather
because of environmental and ethical concerns, if not aesthetic ones.

While inauthenticity is not as popular in personal identity as it has become in
accessories and pleather, the practical variability in the value of authenticity is sufficient to
make us reconsider why our culture upholds it as such a normative ideal, especially in the
twenty-first century. Our world is now saturated with assorted blends of originals, copies,
simulacra, and completely alternate realities, with many people (especially younger ones)
taking little notice of the distinctions between them. Not only have technological
innovations provided countless simulated realities to play within – highly realistic video
games, virtual social spaces, and even complex parallel universes – but our comportment and
self-identity within those spaces has likewise changed. Some of the effects of these media on
our self-representation are already well-known: shy people are emboldened to act in daring
and confident ways behind the protective screen of virtual identity, and criminals find spaces
to act out their impulses with cowardly anonymity. Singles can be heard lamenting the
conundrum that the cute person they met on an online dating site fails to measure up in “real
life,” and a few tragic individuals have become so caught up in realistic fantasy worlds that
their imaginary allegiances and vendettas have resulted in actual violence and murder. In all
these contemporary scenarios, the emphasis once placed on “reality,” as distinct from role-
playing, illusion, and fantasy, has begun to erode. What this means for the value of personal
authenticity in the future is not certain. On the one hand, some of these technologies
arguably facilitate authenticity by removing the usual social constraints on our self-
expression: finally, we are free to really “be ourselves” within certain protected arenas. On
the other hand, as disgruntled singles will attest, the true self is not necessarily liberated but
merely masked by clever advancements in virtual reality, which lead to the temptation to
swap one’s true self for an idealized version of it.

In short, while the presumptive connection between authenticity and truth will
endure, and while humans will always experience a certain lust for “reality,” we might be
poised to undergo a precipitous shift in our thinking about the value of authenticity. Rapid
changes in our understanding of reality – its meaning, its boundaries, and its significance –
are already sparking changes in our understanding of each other and ourselves. The ubiquity
of alternate realities open to our exploration might lead to a gradual devaluation of reality
itself, and consequently of all the things associated with authenticity: historical originality, metaphysical uniqueness, and non-dissimulation. Then again, perhaps the threat of mass deception and our newfound capacities for information-sharing bode a renewed obsession with authenticity, as seen in the fad of reality-television shows, personal blogs, and homemade videos on the Internet.\(^1\) Interestingly, both of these trends toward polar views of authenticity appear to be concentrated within the generation born in the last two decades of the twentieth century. They will ultimately decide whether authenticity continues to command widespread cultural worship, or whether it might once again retreat into our memories as a quaint, perhaps dangerous, pipe dream.

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\(^1\) Of course, whether the “reality” presented in these media corresponds to the reality that would exist unrecorded, or whether it creates an entirely new reality, is a matter of debate.
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