

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Autonomy and Authenticity as Ideals of Agency

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9tn514jj>

### Author

White, Justin Fred

### Publication Date

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Autonomy and Authenticity as Ideals of Agency

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Philosophy

by

Justin Fred White

March 2016

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Mark Wrathall, Chairperson

Dr. John Martin Fischer

Dr. Agnieszka Jaworska

Dr. Pierre Keller

Dr. Georgia Warnke

Copyright by  
Justin Fred White  
2016

The Dissertation of Justin Fred White is approved:

---

---

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

This project has been benefitted from feedback of too many to name, but the members of my committee deserve special thanks for their support, encouragement, and feedback.

Thank you for your help throughout the process.

For Anna, Joshua, Nathan, and Michael,  
who have made this adventure a joyous one;  
and for my parents,  
for their support and encouragement over the years.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Autonomy and Authenticity as Ideals of Agency

by

Justin Fred White

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Philosophy  
University of California, Riverside, March 2016  
Dr. Mark Wrathall, Chairperson

When thinking about the good life, we probably first think of things like a comfortable home, a satisfying career, meaningful relationships, good food, and involvement in worthwhile causes like reducing world hunger or improving education. But literature and life are replete with individuals who have these things but still find their life lacking. Tolstoy's crisis recounted in *Confession*, for example, arose in the midst of a flourishing estate, recognized masterpieces, and a provided-for family. The supposed elements of a rich and satisfying life still lacked the meaning he had hoped for. On reflection, then, the good life involves more than a checklist of desirable things and activities. We don't just want meaningful relationships and successful careers. We want something more. But what exactly is this elusive extra? Often, people describe it as our desire to live lives that are truly our own or, more technically put, to live autonomous and/or authentic lives.

In this dissertation, I examine autonomy and authenticity as ways of explaining how an action or a life could be an agent's own. On my account, autonomy and authenticity both

depend on one's practical identity. Autonomy is a matter of acting in conformity with one's practical identity and authenticity is a matter of the agent taking ownership and responsibility for her practical identity. After developing accounts of autonomy and authenticity, I examine two further questions. I first examine how autonomy and authenticity can come into conflict in an individual. For example, how can living autonomously threaten an agent's ability to live an authentic life? And, second, I examine the relationship between a self-conception and a practical identity and their effect on an agent's ability to live an autonomous and/or authentic life.

I suggest that both autonomy and authenticity highlight important aspects of a rich human life. And if we ignore either, it will be to our conceptual peril, holding us back from a fuller understanding of the ways our lives can be (or, conversely, can fail to be) our own.



## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One: Autonomy and Practical Identities .....	16
Chapter Two: Authenticity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger.....	66
Chapter Three: A Life of One's Own: Why Did the Butler Do It? .....	123
Chapter Four: Self-Conception and Self-Deception.....	149
Bibliography .....	187

Autonomy and Authenticity as Ideals of Agency  
Introduction

“Maybe I did not live as I should have?” would suddenly come into his head. “But how not, if I did everything one ought to?” he would say to himself and at once drive this sole solution to the whole riddle of life and death away from him as something completely impossible.

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*<sup>1</sup>

Though neither science, nor art, nor politics itself interested him, [Stepan Arkadyich] firmly held the same views on all these subjects as the majority and his newspaper did, and changed them only when the majority did, or, rather, he did not change them, but they themselves changed imperceptibly in him.

Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*<sup>2</sup>

At some point, most of us have asked ourselves what sort of life we want to live and what sort of life is most worth living. The question of the good life has a long intellectual history. But it is also one of the most natural even if difficult questions we ask others and (more importantly) ourselves as we try to decide how to live or, in the case of Ivan Ilyich, as we near our deaths. When asked what kind of life we want, we may first respond with things like a comfortable home, an enjoyable job, meaningful relationships, good food, entertainment, involvement in something worthwhile and lasting, and the like. But if we were to push a little further and ask why we want these particular things and not some others, it might be harder to give an answer. We might find ourselves saying, “Because those are things I want, the things I value and care about.” And if someone asked why my preferences would matter in choosing what sort of life to lead, we would be nearing the end of a productive conversation. Why would I want what someone else wants? It is, after all, my

---

<sup>1</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 2009), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin, 2000), 7.

life we are talking about. Of course, my life being mine is not enough to make it good or worthwhile. I could freely pursue a life that is far from the good life. And one might think that the emphasis on living “my life” increases the odds that I do exactly that, perhaps focusing on my own fleeting pleasures and failing to pursue activities with value beyond my own desires. But setting that worry aside, living a life of one’s own life does seem to be one consideration in pursuing a good and worthwhile life.

The refrain of Sinatra’s “My Way” claims that even more important than the successes and failures, the fond memories and the regrets, was the fact that the individual did it his way. One could resist this idea. Even within the context of the song, for example, it may seem far-fetched to say that the most important part of the life was simply that he did it his way. But even if we disagree with the way it is put forward, Sinatra illustrates the idea that in addition to the things listed above—home, job, relationships, and so forth—we tend to want our life to be our own. Someone might retort: Well, whose life would it be if not mine? And, to be sure, in some minimal sense I cannot but lead my own life. But even if we don’t share the worry, the thought that we could find ourselves living lives that are not our own is familiar. We don’t, for example, want merely to live the lives others expect us to, even if those others matter to us. We want our life to be of our own choosing and to reflect what we care about and, perhaps, what we find ourselves drawn to on some deep level. All other things being equal, having a life’s path be the individual’s own in these senses seems to add to the goodness of a life. That is not to say, however, that leading my own life is sufficient for it to be the good life. There is more to the good life than it being mine, but it is often thought to be part of the puzzle.

Yet even if we agree that living a life of one's own is good, it is not always clear what it means to do so. Part of the difficulty is that we can have different things in mind (sometimes at the same time) when we say this sort of thing. We want to be able to effectively pursue our interests to have some control over the elements and circumstances that surround us. William Ernest Henley's "Invictus" captures this sentiment when he writes, "I am the master of my fate / I am the captain of my soul." Our lack of freedom can come from others, but it can also come from within. We want the fortitude or strength of character to do what we think we should or to persist in our commitments. When we fail to do so, we might seem less in control of what we do, giving into pressures or exhibiting weak-willed behavior. I use autonomy to refer to this notion of self-guidance or self-governance. We act autonomously, on my account, when we act in accordance with our practical identities.

Another sense of what it is to live my own life is the idea that we want to be true to ourselves, we want to be authentic. We want to live in accordance with what we really care about and what matters to us. Sincerity in our life matters to us. We don't want to live a lie. But the lie here is less to others than it is to oneself. It seems that we owe it to ourselves to live in accordance with who we are, to live in a way that reflects what really matters to us. The situation is further complicated by the fact that so much of who we are—what we desire, care about, value, and so forth—is significantly shaped by others. How can my life be my own when so much of the shape and color of the life are, to borrow Loren Lomasky's phrase, "ingested with one's mother's milk"?<sup>3</sup> It could seem that being authentic requires

---

<sup>3</sup> Loren Lomasky. *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 47.

rejecting one's upbringing or inherited beliefs and, instead, following some other path. One problem with this approach, however, is that all too often one inherited life path is cast off for another life path—perhaps connected to some counter-culture movement—that is no more (and is often less) our own than the life we grew up in.

Yet perhaps as strong as the intuitive appeal enjoyed by autonomy and authenticity, so is the suspicion that they are, for one reason or another, not all they are cracked up to be. In short, our society is deeply ambivalent about autonomy and authenticity.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes they are celebrated as key to living a rich and worthwhile life, seen as the (deservedly) central values of modernity. For many, autonomy, or self-governance, has undeniable appeal. Perhaps it is our desire to be able to direct the course of our lives without external coercion or simply our desire to be able to effectively pursue what we want, to be self-governing and not to succumb to temptation or distraction, we want to be able to pursue the course we have charted. And it is plausible that authenticity has become so widely used (and perhaps abused) because it resonates with our desire to do things that matter to us, to not just go through the motions but to have our lives express who we are and not be the mere reflections of our upbringing or our society.

But as I suggested earlier, other times we decry autonomy and authenticity, perhaps thinking they are simply self-indulgence masquerading as something nobler than they really are. Or even if we think they would be valuable, one could think real autonomy and authenticity are implausibly, even impossibly, demanding. One could worry, for example, that autonomy ignores our deep and inevitable dependence on others and could think that

---

<sup>4</sup> Because both are terms of art, their use in common parlance doesn't always line up with their use in philosophical contexts (to say nothing of the disagreements about these concepts within academic discussions).

genuine autonomy would require some type of impossible self-creation. And, when it comes to authenticity, perhaps in part due to its adoption in popular culture, authenticity sometimes appears as a justification, even glorification, of self-indulgence, and/or as a slightly more sophisticated version of the teenage desire for independence and originality. It could be seen as an amoral ideal at best, but perhaps with a tendency toward the immoral.

Let me very briefly note some of the approaches of the knockers of autonomy and authenticity.<sup>5</sup> In *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford argues against the ideal of autonomy, pushing instead for what he calls the ideal of attention. Autonomy, he thinks, depends on the view of an individual isolated from others and requires an impossibly high level of self-creation and control of the environment in which one lives. And, going further, genuine human flourishing involves a certain submission and attention to one's environment, not freedom from it. Crawford turns to certain strands in the phenomenological tradition to argue that it is through skilled practices that we can find our bearings in an age of distraction. Skilled practices like carpentry, cooking, and athletic pursuits require a balance between freedom and structure that better illustrates excellent human agency. Because these contexts are already significantly shaped by others (and by the nature of the tools and contexts they involve), autonomy is at best benignly illusory and, perhaps, harmful if it depends on an conception of an overly sovereign self.

In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor discusses what he sees as problematic trends that have developed as a result of our emphasis on what he calls “deviant forms” of

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles Taylor uses the terms “boosters” and “knockers” to describe those in favor and opposed to authenticity as it is often understood in modern society. *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

authenticity.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on authenticity, on living a life that expresses who you are, has lead to a culture of narcissism in which self-fulfillment is the major value. As a society, we have come to recognize few external demands and have fewer serious commitments to others.<sup>7</sup> Taylor cites Christopher Lasch and Allan Bloom as among the critics of authenticity. They claim it is founded on or veers towards narcissism and threatens to undermine the compassion and empathy on which our civil society depends.<sup>8</sup> And the success of the notion of authenticity doesn't always help. The prevalence of "authenticity" and similar notions in ad campaigns simultaneously shows its intuitive appeal and makes many worry that it is nothing more than a conceptually grandiose version of a juvenile desire for independence and originality.

As I flesh out the notions of autonomy and authenticity in the remaining chapters, I refine and slightly modify the initial sketches offered here. I have two big-picture goals—one conceptual and one methodological. The first goal is to better understand autonomy, authenticity, and some of the challenges that face human agency. The second goal, however, is to better bring contemporary analytic philosophy and continental philosophy into conversation with each other on these questions of agency. Agency theory has been a growing field in analytic philosophy and one could argue that the question of what it means to be a human agent has been one of the key questions guiding so-called continental philosophy. My contention is that these investigations could benefit from entering into

---

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 21, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979). Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

conversation. Autonomy and authenticity typically enjoy pride of place in different philosophical traditions. Broadly speaking, autonomy has been the focus of Anglo-American, analytic philosophy, while authenticity has been the focus of continental philosophy.<sup>9</sup> I suggest that both autonomy and authenticity highlight important aspects of a rich human life. And if we ignore either, it will be to our conceptual peril, holding us back from a fuller understanding of the ways our lives can be (or, conversely, can fail to be) our own.

I propose that autonomy and authenticity, properly understood, are important ideals of agency that highlight how we make our lives our own. But living a life of one's own—whether in terms of autonomy or authenticity—is only part of what goes into living a good, worthwhile life. They are ideals of agency, according to which actions or lives may be better or worse, but they are not the final word. To better see the role that autonomy and authenticity play in human agency, I will start with a chapter on each of these notions. In each chapter, I will discuss what is involved in the particular concept.

Here are a few sketches of individuals who show different ways lives may seem fall short in terms of autonomy and/or authenticity. Some of them will return in later chapters. But even if they don't, they should help give a better feel for what is at stake in questions of autonomy and authenticity. Although designed to highlight different ways in which lives may fall short of that ideal, the sketches should also help show that these ideals are best understood along a spectrum and that even for individuals seeming to live fairly inauthentic or non-autonomous lives, it is not always so simple. I think Kwame Anthony Appiah is right when he argues we should make our conceptions of autonomy (or authenticity) able to

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course, these are not sharp divides, either geographically or philosophically, as people on both sides of the English Channel can be found doing work in both traditions. And, further, the work of many philosophers is hard to classify cleanly into either camp.



accommodate lives that may fall short of certain standards of self-creation.<sup>10</sup> These individuals are all trying to live according to certain values, even if the particular values or the ways they take them up may seem a bit off. The ways in which they succeed and sometimes fall short as agents are often illustrative of our own successes and failures as we try to live lives of our own.

*Conformist Carrie:* If someone wanted to know what was in style at a given time, one would only need to watch and talk to Carrie. Her favorite clothes are the clothes that are featured in the latest fashion magazines. Her favorite music perfectly reflects the current Top-40. Her favorite sports teams happen to perfectly coincide with the teams that won the most recent championship and/or those that have the most prominent figures in a given sport (it makes things easier for Carrie when these two coincide). And since it's in style to be your own individual, Carrie makes it a point to avoid eating at chain restaurants, choosing instead to eat at the "artisan" restaurants, particularly those with high ratings on Yelp.

*Mr. Stevens:* Mr. Stevens is a butler in England in 1956. Stevens has had a long career, primarily working for Lord Darlington. Although Darlington's reputation has fallen on hard times as his involvement with the Nazi party has become better known, Stevens insists that Darlington was a great man. In many ways, Stevens is an exemplary butler, dedicating his life to Darlington and to the smooth running of the estate. As a result of his professional focus, however, Stevens has missed out on important life events, like his father's death, and potential loving relationships, with his former co-worker Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn). Mr. Farraday, a wealthy American, has recently purchased Darlington's estate and encourages Stevens to take some personal time and tries (generally unsuccessfully) to engage Stevens in friendly banter. Because he always deferred to Darlington and to the norms of a now fading social world, Stevens isn't sure how to respond to his new employer's requests.

*Hipster Harry:* Carrie's brother Harry thinks she has horrible taste when it comes to things like fashion and music. More accurately, Harry thinks Carrie doesn't have taste, since she simply follows what is popular at a given moment. Trying to be as unlike Carrie as possible, Harry works hard to be original and to stand apart from the crowd. As a result, he follows some of the same magazines and radio stations as Carrie just to make sure that nothing he likes is too mainstream. But he also follows various blogs to track indie bands performing nearby and to stay aware of styles he should check out at local thrift stores.

---

<sup>10</sup> Kwame Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 41-42.

*Weak-willed William:* William prides himself on his lofty aspirations and has strong beliefs about what a good and worthwhile life looks like. He wants to succeed in his career pursuits and has a clear plan about what that would involve. He also has a clear vision of how he ought to live his life and how he should treat others. William's problem is that he often finds himself falling short of his ideals. When he believes he should work in order to complete a project important to his career goals, very often he finds himself binge-watching whole series of TV shows instead. In addition, even though he feels he should treat his friends and family better, most of the time he finds himself treating them poorly, belittling them and perhaps even holding them back from flourishing.

*Dutiful David:* David is a successful medical student, preparing for his internship and residency. He has graduated near the top of his class, which was to be expected given his family's tradition of medicine. He has not yet decided what area of medicine to specialize in—his father wants him to become a surgeon but his mother hopes he follows her into oncology. Part of the problem is that David has never loved medicine. He finished a double major in Biochemistry and Economics, but only because he knew his parents would have been disappointed (at best) had he followed his true passion and studied painting.

*Deferential Daphne:* Daphne is a housewife who is very devoted to her husband and to making him happy. Her tastes and preferences are shaped by her husband: she wears the clothes he likes, cooks the food he prefers, and pursues the hobbies he wants her to. She would willingly relocate in order for him to have a more attractive job, even if it meant leaving her friends, career, or interests. Daphne's deference is not part of a larger give-and-take in which she defers to her husband in some areas and he defers to her in others; he doesn't defer to her. Because Daphne believes that women's greatest value comes in serving their families, Daphne finds great satisfaction in serving the interests of her husband and family.<sup>11</sup>

*Sellout Sam:* Sam is a talented musician with good artistic sense. With extensive musical training and highly capable in various genres, he has always aspired to create great art—whether playing his violin or his Gibson electric guitar. Some local performances have garnered positive reviews, leading to an album contract for his band. Aware of the common financial difficulties for musicians, Sam decides to produce a potentially better-selling pop album for his first album. He justifies it because, after it sells well and with a successful tour, he will have the time and money to write music more in keeping with his artistic vision.

---

<sup>11</sup> Deferential Daphne is a version of Thomas Hill's deferential housewife. Thomas Hill, "Servility and Self-Respect," *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5-6.

In an obvious sense, all of these individuals are living their own lives. Again, one might ask, whose lives are they if they are not the individuals' own? But this question relies on a fairly minimal and less interesting standard of ownership. In different ways and to different degrees, there is a sense in which the lives of these individuals may not seem to fully be their own. On my picture, an agent is autonomous to the extent that her actions flow from her practical identity. An agent is authentic, on the other hand, to the extent that she has taken ownership and responsibility for her life. In Chapters One and Two—"Autonomy and Practical Identity" and "Authenticity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger"—I develop accounts of autonomy and authenticity, respectively. The two chapters that follow look at some of the consequences of this account. In Chapter Three, I look at the way that autonomy and authenticity can come into conflict. In Chapter Four, I examine the way that our agency is (or is not) affected by our ignorance about the sort of people that we are.

In Chapter One, "Autonomy and Practical Identity," I examine two common approaches to autonomy in the analytic agency literature. On the first approach (exemplified by Gary Watson), autonomy depends on acting in accordance with reason. Actions are thus autonomous as they accord with our rational judgments about what is best to do in a given situation. The second approach (exemplified by Harry Frankfurt) emphasizes our desires/passions and explains autonomy in terms of actions flowing from desires/passions that are distinctively ours. We act autonomously when we act according to desires that we want to have. For both approaches, non-autonomous actions are those that lack the relevant mesh—either because they exhibit a gap between our motivation and our evaluational judgment (Watson) or because there is not the proper alignment between the different orders of desires (Frankfurt). When we construe the "self" of self-governance too narrowly,

however, we risk either mistakenly excusing poor behavior as not *really* our own or, by the same token, failing to properly recognize some good acts as deeply our own doing. Drawing on but modifying Christine Korsgaard's account of practical identity, I argue that we act autonomously when our actions flow from our practical identities, descriptions under which we value ourselves as agents and find our lives to be worth living.<sup>12</sup> Because practical identities outstrip either capacity individually (and perhaps both together), my account can better address the challenges posed by certain cases to these two approaches.

In Chapter Two, "Authenticity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger," I examine Soren Kierkegaard's and Martin Heidegger's accounts of what it means to be an authentic individual or, put differently, to live a life truly one's own. It can be hard to pin down how we can live lives truly our own when the shapes of our lives are largely not up to us. My focus in this chapter will be on Kierkegaard's treatment of the ideal of individuality in *The Concept of Anxiety* and on Heidegger's treatment of authenticity in *Being and Time*.<sup>13</sup> I argue that, inter alia, taking ownership in the sense required for authenticity opens the door for individuals to guide their lives in a non-trivial way, to see their role in their actions and, consequently, increases their ability to re-orient their lives when necessary instead of merely conforming to custom, or habit, or social pressures. As I hope to make clear, authenticity

---

<sup>12</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

<sup>13</sup> One could ask how Kierkegaard's notion of individuality (or "self" or "human" as an achievement) maps onto Heidegger's notion of authenticity. An exhaustive treatment of this issue goes beyond the scope of this paper. In this paper, I hope to show that there are important overlaps in concern between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, even if their respective ideals of selfhood are not identical.

need not always require a drastic renovation of one's life. It does, however, require one to take a certain orientation towards the stuff that makes up a life.

I have argued that autonomy and authenticity are distinct notions. In Chapter Three, "Why Did the Butler Do It?" I use Mr. Stevens, the butler from Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, to examine one way that autonomy and authenticity can interact. Specifically, in Mr. Stevens's life, we see autonomy and authenticity come apart in worrisome ways.<sup>14</sup> Living a life of one's own involves two aspects—autonomy and authenticity—and these coincide with the two senses in which Mr. Stevens uses dignity. The first sense (Dignity<sub>1</sub>) depends on the individual's actions being in keeping with one's professional role. The other (Dignity<sub>2</sub>) depends on "choosing" one's life, on taking ownership for one's life and not simply deferring to others. My accounts of authenticity and autonomy draw on Heidegger's account of authenticity and Christine Korsgaard's account of practical identity and its role in autonomous action.<sup>15</sup> I suggest how a life becoming more one's own along one dimension can lead it to become less one's own along another. In the case of Mr. Stevens, a sort of hyper-autonomy seems to threaten his ability to live an authentic life. Because the process of identity construction and identification is complex, we can autonomously live lives that

---

<sup>14</sup> Although accounts of human agency sometimes discuss both notions, because they do not explicitly pull them apart, they can bleed into each other.

<sup>15</sup> Both Heidegger and Korsgaard cite Aristotle and Kant as major influences, so bringing them together should come as little surprise. But because they approach these influences so differently, it is not so simple. While Heidegger largely attempts to point out the shortcomings in Kant's work in order to make space for his contribution, Korsgaard's goal has been described as keeping "the 'must' that Kant put into morality while humanizing morality's source" through her use of, *inter alia*, the concept of practical identities. G.A. Cohen describes Korsgaard's goal this way in "Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law," *Sources of Normativity*, 174, 188.

detract from our broader interests in and judgments about the good life, including our interest in living an authentic life.

My accounts of autonomy and authenticity depend on one's practical identity—whether acting in conformity with it in the case of autonomy or taking ownership and responsibility for it in the case of authenticity—so there is a natural question about how the way an agent conceives of her practical identity affects her agency. At the very least, we are not always the best judges of ourselves, so what is required of our self-conceptions in order for us to be autonomous or authentic? In Chapter Four, “Self-Conception and Self-Deception,” I first suggest the problem that our poor self-knowledge—whether self-ignorance or self-deception—pose for two prominent accounts of human agency.<sup>16</sup> I go on to argue that a certain kind of self-ignorance in agency is pervasive, perhaps inevitable, given the perspectival structure of agency. I conclude by arguing not only that certain types of self-ignorance need not undermine robust human agency but also that the very factors that seem to undermine our agency are in fact what enable it. That said, certain types or degrees of self-ignorance and self-deception can affect our ability to direct our actions. In particular, if we do not know what we are like, it can be difficult for *us* to change the people we are. That's not to say we won't change, but we may be less effective at reaching the goal we had in mind and it is less clear that we will be self-owning or self-directing in the senses required for authenticity or autonomy. My argument depends on the distinction between an agent's practical identity and her self-conception and the claim that it is our practical identity, not our self-conception, that is central to autonomy.

---

<sup>16</sup> Self-ignorance and self-deception are distinct, even though they can feed into each other. In order for me to deceive myself, it seems that I must have some knowledge in order to deceive myself about it.

It has become increasingly clear to me that the questions involved in this dissertation are far more than one dissertation can adequately address. As a result, this dissertation also acts as a springboard for (at least) two avenues of future work. For one, there are important historical considerations that have received far from sufficient attention. I have only gestured at some of the key figures in the in the philosophical history of autonomy and authenticity. Autonomy, for example, came into its own as a philosophical term in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century present-day Germany as those coming of age at this time simultaneously had, in Terry Pinkard's words, "an awareness (sometimes suffocating) of what they were supposed to do, a sense that their life's path had already been laid out for them, and an equally compelling awareness that they were not 'determined' by these pre-determined social paths, that it was 'their own' lives they had to lead."<sup>17</sup> To navigate this challenge, many turned to Rousseau, and from here we have what could be the origin of our modern conceptions of autonomy and authenticity. I would like to trace the development of these different notions through modernity.

But in addition to further historical work, there are further questions about the nature of autonomy and authenticity and about the relationship between our practical identities, self-conceptions, and human agency. It seems that there are various "selves" at play in human agency. There are, at least, the self that we aspire to be, the self that we take ourselves to be, and the self that in fact guides our actions. There is much more work to be done to explore the way that these relate to our ability to guide our lives. When a person's actions fall short of what he or she claims to value or find important, we might think the

---

<sup>17</sup> Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11.

individual's actions do not fully express who he or she is and should be viewed differently than actions that do align with the person's values. I agree that actions that reflect one's highest values or commitments are importantly different than those that do not. But as I suggest throughout, I disagree with the belief that the latter class of actions is in some sense less the individual's own than the others and with the claim that we are perhaps less autonomous or authentic when we do things we don't think we should. There are, of course, times when this might be right. But I think we may autonomously do things that we don't think are, all things considered, the right thing to do. And in some cases, the path of authenticity may not always be the path to human flourishing.



Chapter One:  
Autonomy and Practical Identities  
Justin F. White

“Despite his best intentions to commit himself to God and family, to get through this construction project without conceding another thought to Weela and her fascinating calves, the following Tuesday there he was at Salt Pond after work, innocent as a child, throwing a ball around with his dog. . . .

If only he could figure out his attraction to this woman, he decided, maybe he could liberate himself from it. But the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that freedom itself was to blame; for the first time in his life he had been left to his own devices, free from the restrictions of church and family, free to do and think and choose as he saw fit. Ever since he was a boy all his choices had been made for him, and now that they had been given a little latitude, where had his questionable instincts led him? To a dark-skinned prostitute with a strange name who liked to wash her clothes in a pond.”

Brady Udall, *The Lonely Polygamist*<sup>18</sup>

“[Reason] is only reason, and it can only satisfy the reasoning ability of man, whereas volition is a manifestation of the whole of life, I mean of the whole of human life, including reason with all its concomitant head-scratchings. For my part, I quite naturally want to live in order to satisfy all my faculties and not my reasoning faculty alone, that is to say, only some twentieth part of my capacity for living.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*<sup>19</sup>

## I. Introduction

We can do things that surprise even ourselves. Sometimes we fall short of our expectations, acting in ways we don't think are best. But we can also surpass our expectations, doing something better than we thought we would. Is our autonomy, or our self-governance, compromised in either of these cases? I might seem to act non-autonomously when I do something I don't think I should because I fail to govern myself according to ideals I hold or things I am committed to. Presumably, one could (apparently) akratically or ignorantly do

---

<sup>18</sup> Brady Udall, *The Lonely Polygamist* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 143-144.

<sup>19</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, in *The Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 285-286.

good also: imagine a miserly, pre-reformed Scrooge giving into the temptation of donating to a charity. But exactly what is it that makes actions autonomous or non-autonomous?<sup>20</sup>

Autonomy is generally understood to be self-governance; we are autonomous when we are self-governing. That much is generally agreed on. But there have been a variety of ways to explain why certain acts are self-governed and others are not. Accounts of autonomy tend to define autonomy in terms of some key human capacity—perhaps reason, perhaps emotion—but this can cause us to fail to consider how the self that can guide actions is broader than any one preferred faculty. When we construe the “self” of self-governance too narrowly, we risk either mistakenly excusing poor behavior as not *really* our own or, by the same token, failing to properly recognize some good acts as deeply our own doing. I will argue that we act autonomously when our actions flow from our practical identities, descriptions under which we value ourselves as agents and find our lives to be worth living.<sup>21</sup> Depending on how we conceive a practical identity, however, defining autonomy in terms of practical identity could again lead to overly restrictive or permissive accounts. And even if some prominent accounts of autonomy are too restrictive, we must beware of letting the pendulum swing too far the other direction. The goal, then, is to avoid either over-inflated or deflated accounts of autonomy.

Let me briefly sketch two influential approaches to autonomy. On the first approach, autonomy depends on acting in accordance with reason. Actions are thus autonomous as they accord with our rational judgments about what is best to do in a given situation.

---

<sup>20</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah argues for a conception of autonomy that is neither excessively demanding—“pric[ing] itself out of the market”—nor overly deflated—“sell[ing] itself too cheaply.” Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

According to Gary Watson’s “Free Agency,” for example, we act autonomously when we are motivated (and act) in accordance with our judgments about what is best to do. The second approach emphasizes our desires/passions and explains autonomy in terms of actions flowing from desires/passions that are distinctively ours. Harry Frankfurt’s hierarchical model of desires has been a prominent account in this vein. We act autonomously, according to Frankfurt and similarly-minded agency theorists, when we act according to desires that we want to have. For both approaches, non-autonomous actions are those that lack the relevant mesh—either because they exhibit a gap between our motivation and our evaluational judgment (Watson) or because there is not the proper alignment between the different orders of desires (Frankfurt). Because our practical identities are shaped by and tied up with our rational and emotional capacities, my account draws from both of these approaches. But because practical identities outstrip either capacity individually (and perhaps both together), my account can better address the challenges posed by key cases to some of the prevailing views. Or so I will argue.

In Section II, I discuss why autonomy matters to us as human agents. Given the esteem the ideal of autonomy has enjoyed in modernity, this might seem like a strange task. But its popularity has also caused it to be used in many different ways. Nomy Arpaly suggests that there are at least eight different things we call “autonomy” and failing to keep them separate leads to confusion when analyzing agency.<sup>22</sup> Our focus will be on what she

---

<sup>22</sup> Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 173. Arpaly wonders if the moral responsibility theorist might be better served by ignoring intuitions about autonomy and returning to questions of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness. Since, like John Martin Fischer, I think it is important to keep moral responsibility conceptually distinct from autonomy, Arpaly’s suggestion that intuitions about autonomy can distract us from intuitions about moral responsibility can be taken in stride. However, although we

calls “agent autonomy”—the agent’s ability to decide which motivational state to follow, a type of self-control or self-government. I will suggest two, interrelated clusters of reasons we should be concerned about agent autonomy.

In Section III, I look at two prominent theories of agent autonomy, one representing each of the common approaches mentioned above. I examine Harry Frankfurt’s and Gary Watson’s accounts of autonomy and show how each fails to capture the heart of self-governance (autonomy). I illustrate these shortcomings primarily by looking at cases they fail to adequately account for. Underlying my critique of these views is the idea that much of the time what bothers us with our less-than-ideal actions is that they are ours in a fairly rich sense, but we wish they weren’t. They bother us because they reveal to us (or remind us of) aspects of ourselves we wish we didn’t have and sometimes forget we do. Of course, sometimes we are overcome by alien or external forces in ways that are incompatible with autonomous agency. But because we are complex creatures with, to borrow John Doris’s phrase, “unaccessed and unruly depths,” we also can find ourselves guiding our actions in ways that go against our all-things-considered judgments and/or our higher-order desires.<sup>23</sup>

To address some of these worries, in Section IV, I suggest that autonomous actions are those that flow from one’s practical identity. I largely draw from Christine Korsgaard’s description of practical identities, but my account of valuing allows for the balance of reasons coming from our practical identities to guide us in ways that we may not fully (or

---

ought to take care that intuitions about autonomy not cloud our judgments of responsibility, this does not negate the value of autonomy as a distinct concept, which illuminates important dimensions of human agency.

<sup>23</sup> John Doris, *Talking to Our Selves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

reflectively) endorse. If a practical identity is a description under which you value yourself,<sup>24</sup> and if valuing something is to see it as giving you reasons for action, then you can see yourself as having reasons to act under a given description, even if you are not entirely comfortable with (or perhaps even fully aware as yourself fitting) the description. I will discuss this in more detail in Section IV and in Chapter V, “Self-Conception and Self-Deception.” But, in short, I think we can act autonomously when we act in accordance with our practical identities, even if we do not identify with them.<sup>25</sup> My claim that we can act autonomously on an identity we do not fully identify with (but are identified with) reveals a deep similarity and a deep difference with Korsgaard’s account, which I will explore later.<sup>26</sup> It

---

<sup>24</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Here I follow Agnieszka Jaworska in distinguishing between “identifying with something” and “being identified with something.” I will develop the distinction further below. But for now, “identifying with” something depends on how the agent views the thing, attitude, or belief in question. An agent is “identified with” something, on the other hand, when that thing, attitude, or belief plays a central role in the agent’s psychology, regardless of how the agent views it. Agnieszka Jaworska, “Caring and Internality,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74.3 (2007).

<sup>26</sup> It is a deep similarity in the following way. Korsgaard thinks our human identity grounds the more contingent aspects of our identity, and so if we are to value anything at all, we must value our humanity. And so because as reflective agents we cannot help but value humanity, she thinks we cannot escape the demands of morality. Thus there is a sense in which, as reflective agents, we are always identified with humanity, even if we do not consciously do so. But surely individuals can value things without having reflected on the way they value their humanity (to say nothing of the connection to morality). Just as we can act on identities that we do not fully identify with, then, we can be normatively guided by commitments that are, at best, dispositional and not occurrent.

But even the way I have framed the similarity points to a deep difference. In the end, Korsgaard thinks autonomous action must conform to the categorical imperative. I’m not so sure. It might be that the autonomous individual would be disposed to recognize her commitment to the categorical imperative (because of her humanity) and would recognize this commitment if she were appropriately guided. But prior to such guiding, it seems one could autonomously act even if that disposition remains a disposition.

could also explain the asymmetry in the way we tend, perhaps mistakenly, to ascribe autonomy to ourselves and others when we do something better than we'd expect but deny it to actions that fall short of one's self-conception.<sup>27</sup>

I am more permissive when it comes to what qualifies as autonomous action because I am also more permissive when it comes to what counts as the self of autonomy. We act autonomously when our actions flow from our practical identities. A practical identity, on my account, is a conjunct of the roles, desires, values, and characteristics that give us consistent reasons to act and around which we structure our lives. But as I argue in "Self-Conception and Self-Deception," we can structure our lives around desires, roles, characteristics, and values that we do not (and perhaps would not) reflectively endorse. There is thus a sense in which each of us finds himself or herself inescapably with a practical identity, and when our actions are guided by that practical identity, we act autonomously. But not all actions are equally guided by our practical identity. We can do things out of boredom or distraction and can do things that go against the reasons we have in light of our practical identities.

In Chapter Three, I suggest that the notion of authenticity tracks another way in which our practical identities can become more our own. By identifying with our practical

---

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Tobia discusses a similar trend in "Personal Identity and the Phineas Gage Effect." He suggests that when we make judgments about personal identity for an individual across time, it is not only degree of similarity but also direction of change between the person at the earlier and later time that matters. When a person changes for the worse (as was the case with Phineas Gage), people are more likely to see the later self as distinct from the earlier self. When a person changes for the better, however, people are more likely to see the later individual as continuous with the earlier self. Tobia, "Personal Identity and the Phineas Gage Effect," *Analysis* 75(3), 396-405.

identity and taking responsibility for the selves we are, our actions and lives can be more authentic.

## II. Two Reasons We Care About Autonomy

The capacity for reflectiveness is often thought to be a distinguishing feature of human existence and agency. We can step back from our desires, beliefs, and feelings, and consider our relationship to them. Harry Frankfurt describes this as “taking ourselves seriously”:

“Taking ourselves seriously means that we are not prepared to accept ourselves just as we come. We want our thoughts, our feelings, our choices, and our behavior to make sense. We are not satisfied to think that our ideas are formed haphazardly, or that our actions are driven by transient and opaque impulses or by mindless decisions. We need to direct ourselves—or at any rate to believe that we are directing ourselves—in thoughtful conformity to stable and appropriate norms.”<sup>28</sup>

By directing ourselves (or believing we are directing ourselves), we try to avoid being tossed about on the waves of our desires and impulses. We want to feel we are, to some significant degree, in control of the course of our lives and not merely passengers on a train. Even if the journey is pleasant, something seems lacking if we are just along for the ride, without having some say in the stops or destination.

Because of this tendency, it is often taken for granted that autonomy is a good thing. Parents and teachers seek to develop and respect the autonomy of their children and students. Medical providers have the duty to respect the autonomy of their patients. And political organizations concern themselves with autonomy in different ways. In the context of human agency, we care about autonomy for (at least) two, interrelated reasons—unity and efficacy. First, autonomy requires and facilitates both synchronic and diachronic unity within the agent. And, second, autonomy requires and facilitates agential efficacy. And, further, our

---

<sup>28</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting it Right* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 2.

agential efficacy helps promote both synchronic and diachronic unity. In short, we want to be effective as agents because we want to be able to direct the course of our actions. We want to be able to go where we want to go and do what we want to do. We want to be unified because we want to be sure that *we* are the ones doing the directing, both in the moment and long-term. We care about unity and efficacy, and, I argue, it is when our actions are guided by our practical identity—by that conjunct the roles, desires, values, and characteristics that give us consistent reasons to act and around which we structure our lives—that we are best able to achieve the unity and efficacy we desire.

First, let's briefly discuss unity. To be self-governing, there must be some relatively stable, unified self that can govern or guide my actions. That is not to say that the autonomous self is static. Who I am can change in significant ways. My tastes in music, what kind of work I find worthwhile, and the relationships that organize my life will likely change over time. But without some stability in my tastes, desires, commitments, beliefs, and the like, it is hard to say where I stand and who I am as an agent. That is not to say that the unified agent need be a “square,” to borrow Velleman's term for “a particularly bland species of agent” that he thinks has characterized much of moral psychology.<sup>29</sup> But if Velleman's characterization is true of stock agents in moral psychology, it is even truer of discussions of autonomous agents. This is unfortunate, because we do a disservice to our understanding of agency when the unity or stability connected to autonomy rules out the “disaffected,

---

<sup>29</sup> J. David Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99.



refractory, silly, satanic, or punk” agents and the host of other interesting, compelling, and messy ways that we can govern ourselves.<sup>30</sup>

Autonomy, or acting in conformity with our practical identities, facilitates diachronic unity (unity across time) and synchronic unity (unity at a given time).<sup>31</sup> Michael Bratman discusses the value of the diachronic unity of the agent in the following way. As I commit to a particular course of action and follow through with it, I establish temporal continuity with myself. And I fail to establish this continuity if my commitments, preferences, beliefs, and so forth are not sufficiently consistent across time.<sup>32</sup> Derek Parfit uses the example of a young Russian nobleman who is committed to certain social causes but worries that his commitments will change as he ages and becomes more accustomed to the aristocratic life. Will he be able to govern his future self?<sup>33</sup> In the realm of health, personal trainers and gym memberships can be ways to hold our future selves accountable to our present commitments. Unfortunately, even with such boosts, most resolutions to eat better or exercise more regularly fall short.<sup>34</sup> And this does seem to be some shortcoming in autonomy. But if the inability to follow through on one’s commitments and intentions

---

<sup>30</sup> Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” 99.

<sup>31</sup> Drawing on Michael Bratman, John Doris describes these problems of synchronic and diachronic unity in *Talking to Ourselves*, 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Michael Bratman, “Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency,” *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 327-328.

<sup>34</sup> According to one study, 77% of New Year’s resolvers maintained their commitments for one week, but only 19% kept their resolutions for two years. J.C. Norcross and D.J. Vangarelli, “The Resolution Solution: Longitudinal Examination of New Year’s Change Attempts,” *Journal of Substance Abuse* 1(2): 127-134.

becomes pervasive across different pursuits, one's ability to direct the course of one's life seems importantly compromised. There is something to be said for being able to govern oneself across time and to follow through on one's commitments and intentions.

But in addition to being unified across time (diachronic unity), we also want some degree of unity at a given time (synchronic unity). If I am consistently and deeply conflicted between two (or more) paths, it will be also difficult to effectively direct the course of my life. Recall Leontius from Plato's *Republic*, simultaneously drawn to gaze on the corpses and repulsed by that desire.<sup>35</sup> For a more mundane example, we may feel drawn to finish a work project while also wanting to watch a movie. Sometimes these conflicts are easily resolved. But other times they can lead to agential paralysis. If I am deeply and paralytically ambivalent, I may not be able to act. Or if I do something, it can be unclear whether in what sense *I* was the one acting. Because being able to direct the course of our lives seems central to the good life, this failure is significant.<sup>36</sup>

As agents, however, we want more than unity. We want to achieve what we set out to do. We want to be able to direct our actions according to our intentions. Being an effective agent in this sense can increase both short-term and long-term diachronic unity. By effectively maintaining my commitment to write each day or to eat better, I can increase temporal continuity with myself. But efficacy doesn't always increase unity. If the older Russian nobleman effectively acts on the values his younger self feared he would acquire, he

---

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, 439e-440a.

<sup>36</sup> Unity is distinct from single-mindedness. An agent can be unified while ambivalent. There may be something to be said for single-mindedness, agentially speaking. The single-minded agent may have a clearer path to autonomy than the individual with projects that can come into tension, for example. But the threshold for autonomy should not be so high that ambivalent agents are disqualified.

undercuts the projects his younger self cared about and to some extent weakens his diachronic unity, even though he is effectively translating his current values/preferences/desires into action. But depending on how thoroughly the older nobleman has left behind the ideals of his youth, it could be that in this version of the older nobleman, he still would get good marks for efficacy and synchronic unity.

All things being equal, we want to be effective agents and we are frustrated when something hurts our ability to do so. Our roadblocks can come from others—distinct individuals or society writ large—or they can trace back to ourselves—whether a matter of distraction, depression, addiction, or something else.

I will now examine two influential approaches to autonomy—the desire-based approach and the rational, all-things-considered value approach—and how they address the reasons we care about autonomy, namely, unity and efficacy. To do this, I will look at a prominent example of each approach—Harry Frankfurt for the desire-based approach and Watson for the all-things-considered approach—and show how each of these approaches fails to capture certain instances of self-governed action. For both Frankfurt and Watson, I argue, autonomy comes by too narrowly construing the self of self-governance. I think Dostoevsky’s underground man gets that right. He specifically criticizes the tendency to focus on the human rational capacity. But the criticism can also be extended to any approach that isolates and identifies the self of self-governance with any particular capacity. Because different views emphasize different aspects of agency, they face different challenges. But those troubles arise from a similarly flawed approach.

In “Responsibility and Autonomy,” Fischer suggests “it is contentious whether ‘reason’ or ‘rationality’ corresponds to the real self,” whether the real self is understood in a

robust, metaphysical sense or in a more modest sense related to one's practical reasoning.<sup>37</sup>

The Underground Man memorably illustrates the desire to live in a way that satisfies all his faculties, sometimes rebelling against his reason. The cases of temptation above often seem like subordinating one desire to another or subordinating desire to reason. I will argue that in such instances, one can still act autonomously even when acting against (what one takes to be) their better judgment. By defining autonomy acting in conformity with one's practical identity, I hope to paint a picture of self-governance that involves something closer to "the whole of human life."

### III. Two Views of Autonomy

One challenge in contemporary agency theory has been to explain the difference between actions and mere happenings. When I fight an infection or digest food, or when my hair grows (or, worse, falls out!), these are mere happenings, happening below the level of agency. But when I take medicine or chop onions or shave, these are actions.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes

---

<sup>37</sup> John Martin Fischer, "Responsibility and Autonomy: The Problem of Mission Creep." *Philosophical Issues* 22(1), 175.

<sup>38</sup> In his 1971 paper "Agency," Donald Davidson asks: "What events in the life of a person reveal agency; what are his deeds and his doings in contrast to mere happenings in his history; what is the mark that distinguishes his actions?" Donald Davidson, "Agency," in *Essays on Actions on Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43. The same year, when discussing the willing and unwilling addicts in "Freedom of the Will and The Concept of a Person," Harry Frankfurt claims that the unwilling addict, after identifying himself with the second order desire to not want the drug, "may make the analytically puzzling statements that the force moving him to take the drug is a force other than his own." Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 18. A few years later, Frankfurt uses largely Davidsonian terminology to distinguish between "movements of a person's body that are mere happenings in his history and those that are his own activities." Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 59.

my body moves because I move it. But sometimes it moves in ways that are not up to me.<sup>39</sup> But even among things that we consider actions, some seem to be more mine than others. I can do something in spite of myself when part of me wishes I weren't doing it or, put differently, when I find reasons against it compelling. Or if I act under duress or coercion, my actions seem less fully mine than those without external pressure.<sup>40</sup> Some think out-of-character actions are less my own because they do not reflect who I *really* am. To summarize, then, some happenings are not fully mine because they occur at a sub-agential level—things like digestion, hair growth, and reflexes. And actions can be less than fully mine if, for example, duress or coercion alters my practical reasoning in significant ways.

One way to describe how some actions are more mine than others has been through the concept of autonomy, or self-governance. People tend to agree that to be self-governing, the forces moving agents to action must be appropriately connected to their guidance.<sup>41</sup> But disagreements about the nature of this connection or about what constitutes the agent's guidance lead to different standards for autonomous action. There is general agreement, however, that addiction, brainwashing, and coercion show either a lack of proper connection between the agent's guidance and the effect in the world or a general undermining of the

---

<sup>39</sup> Digestion and hair growth come to mind, as do things like muscle spasms or instances in which I am pushed or pulled by something or someone. In a less mundane vein, Joshua Ferris's novel *The Unnamed* explores an individual's sporadic, mysterious, and irresistible urge to walk.

<sup>40</sup> Determining whether one acts freely in such circumstances is a complex issue. Harry Frankfurt and John Martin Fischer have used Frankfurt-style cases to analyze whether an agent can freely act even if she couldn't have done otherwise. In cases of coercion, a lot hinges on the degree to which the coercion influences the agent's decision process and how well the agent responds (or would respond) to relevant reasons.

<sup>41</sup> See Sarah Buss's discussion of "Personal Autonomy" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

agent's guiding capacities, perhaps both. In these instances, whatever impels the agent to action seems to lack agential authority.

But what constitutes agential authority? What makes it so *I* am guiding (or governing) my actions and not merely being tossed about on the waves of my desires? One way to explain autonomous action has been through a hierarchical theory of desires. The most prominent contemporary version of this approach is Harry Frankfurt's, according to which actions are free when one's first-order desires mesh with one's higher-order desires. When I act on desires I want to act on, I act autonomously. When I want the desire to eat a salad to motivate me to action instead of the desire for French fries and it does—I order and eat the salad—I act freely. Autonomy comes when I act according to desires I want to act on.

Another approach, which I construe broadly as the all-things-considered value approach, thinks that the hierarchical model fails to explain real self-governance. Instead, its proponents emphasize our ability to act according to judgments about what is best to do. When we are motivated to act in ways we judge to be best, we act autonomously. If I am deciding between working on a paper and watching a rerun of a television show, and I judge it would be better to work on the paper, I act autonomously when I am motivated to work on the paper instead of watching the show. Gary Watson argues that we act freely when there is a mesh between our motivational and our evaluational capacities and not, *pace* Frankfurt, between desires of different orders. On this view, we act freely when we act in accordance with what we judge to be valuable or good. We will now examine Frankfurt and Watson as representative of these broad approaches to autonomy. After explaining their views, I will suggest why each falls short. Specifically, I will show a type of case that should

be considered autonomous action but which both Frankfurt's and Watson's theories would consider as exhibiting compromised autonomy.

### **IIIa. The Hierarchical Model of Autonomy (Harry Frankfurt)**

Harry Frankfurt has long been interested in our desire to direct the course of our lives. In his early work, he used a hierarchical model of desires to distinguish between free and unfree action. And although his later work has emphasized the importance of love and what we care about in human agency, much of the overall orientation remains intact. For Frankfurt, our final ends and the reasons we have to act are ultimately grounded in love and in our capacity for caring.

In "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," Harry Frankfurt presents his hierarchical model of action (and free action). He first distinguishes between first-order desires—wanting to do (or not do) something—and second-order desires—wanting to have (or not have) certain desires and motives. He then distinguishes a subset of second-order desires as second-order volitions. For Frankfurt, second-order volitions are second-order desires in which the individual "wants a certain desire to be his will," to culminate in action.<sup>42</sup> Having second-order volitions, on his view, is essential to being a person. Humans are not alone in having first-order desires—desires for certain objects or actions—but we are unique in our capacity to want to be different from what we are. Another way to think about this is through the fact that we are not always satisfied with the sorts of people we are. Or even if we are broadly satisfied with our characters and lives, we might still wish to continue to grow and change. It also means that we are not always happy with the desires or tendencies we have. We can imagine (hardly need to imagine!) someone who has a desire to do something

---

<sup>42</sup> Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," 16.

yet wishes, on some level, that they didn't have that particular desire. Desires to eat certain foods (or amounts of food), to have sex with certain people, or to buy a particular luxury item are the downfall of diets, committed relationships, and well-intended budgets. And sometimes those who give in—eating the plate of brownies, cheating on their partners, or spending excessively—honestly and sincerely wish their desires were different. And this capacity to wish we were different seems uniquely human.<sup>43</sup> Another way of saying this is to say that, as humans, we are distinctive in our capacity for second-order desires (and second-order volitions in particular)—we can want to desire in certain ways or to desire certain things.

Frankfurt elaborates this further by suggesting that a person is more than an entity with both first-order desires and second-order volitions. A person, on his account, is “a type of entity for whom the freedom of its will may be a problem.”<sup>44</sup> That is, we want to have control over which of our desires lead to action. Understanding a person in this way makes it so neither wantons—who do not care what they will—nor suprahuman beings—“whose wills are necessarily free”—are considered persons.<sup>45</sup> Acting freely, for Frankfurt, involves the person identifying with a “particular first-order desire that moves one to action via the

---

<sup>43</sup> Borrowing Nietzsche's image from the *Genealogy of Morality* 1.13, it is strange to say that the eagle wished he had more lamb-like desires. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 25.

<sup>44</sup> Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” 19. Compare this to Heidegger's claim in *Being and Time* that Dasein “is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very being, that being is an issue for it.” Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), 32.

<sup>45</sup> Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” 19.



formation of a second-order volition.”<sup>46</sup> When I want a salad for dinner and identify with that desire, I form a second-order volition—I want my desire for the salad to be motivationally efficacious, perhaps because it is healthier than the French fries and I am committed to eating better. In this scenario, I act freely when I order and eat the salad. This sort of case might seem clear cut. But many of our actions are not so straightforward. In particular, what makes it so that some desires or actions are less mine than others? If I eat the French Fries, for example, what makes it so that I am acting unfreely (or if not entirely unfreely, less freely than when I have the salad)?

In “Identification and Externality,” Frankfurt uses the example of a sudden burst of temper to suggest how some passions are external to us:

“In the course of an animated but amiable enough conversation, a man’s temper suddenly rushes up in him out of control. Although nothing has happened that makes his behavior readily intelligible, he begins to fling dishes, books, and crudely abusive language at his companion. Then his tantrum subsides, and he says: ‘I have no idea what triggered that bizarre spasm of emotion. The feelings just came over me from out of nowhere, and I couldn’t help it. I wasn’t myself. Please don’t hold it against me.’”<sup>47</sup>

Of course, this case is under-described, so it is hard to decide whether these disclaimers are “shabbily insincere devices for obtaining unmerited indulgence” or if they are “genuinely descriptive.”<sup>48</sup> But, for Frankfurt, (at least sometimes) when an agent experiences a passion and conduct that results from it as external, the agent is absolved of responsibility for the passion and the conduct.

---

<sup>46</sup> Fischer, “Freedom and Responsibility,” 167.

<sup>47</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 63.

<sup>48</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 63. We will discuss this case in more detail in Chapter Four, “Self-Conception and Self-Deception.”

By “external,” Frankfurt has in mind whether the passions in question are ones we have identified with or not identified with.<sup>49</sup> Identification involves something deeper or more central to the individual than merely following a desire. If we take the temper-afflicted individual at his word, he doesn’t identify with the passions that overcome him because he does not see them as central to himself. In Frankfurt’s later work and in others building on his account, the notion of caring comes to occupy this position. We are autonomous as we act in accordance with what we care about. And the stability of caring separates it from more tempestuous and flighty passions. When we care about something, “we want to go on wanting it, at least until the goal has been reached . . . and we are disposed to take steps to refresh the desire if it should tend to fade.”<sup>50</sup>

So how exactly does the concept of identification work in these contexts? Frankfurt tends to talk in terms of the agent identifying with something, but identifying with something is conceptually distinct from being identified with something. In “Caring and Internality,” Agnieszka Jaworska distinguishes between subjective identification and ontological identification.<sup>51</sup> Ontological identification picks “out attitudes that properly belong to the agent from the sea of his psychic life.” Subjective identification, on the other hand, tracks how the “agent perceives aspects of his psychology and how his attitudes appear to him.”<sup>52</sup> For Jaworska, it is ontological, not subjective, identification that is central

---

<sup>49</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 68.

<sup>50</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Jaworska, “Caring and Internality,” 537-538, 542.

<sup>52</sup> Jaworska, “Caring and Internality,” 537.

to internality (and externality). As she puts it: “In the matter of properly recognizing his ownership of his motivations, as in any other matter of self-knowledge, any particular agent may be oblivious, or mistaken, or subject to self-deception.”<sup>53</sup>

Someone could be identified with something (ontological identification) while failing to identify with it (subjective identification). If I have a certain character trait I would rather not, I can be identified with it even if I do not identify with it. Susan can be generous even if she doesn’t see herself that way. I think Jaworska is right to connect internality to objective identification, but Frankfurt’s sense of identification required for autonomy is much closer to Jaworska’s subjective identification.<sup>54</sup> By identifying with certain attitudes or dispositions, he thinks we make them uniquely our own. On the other hand, “we can decisively rid ourselves of any responsibility for [the continuation of certain inclinations and tendencies] by renouncing them and struggling conscientiously to prevent them from affecting our conduct.”<sup>55</sup> The man who threw the tantrum could thus be freed from responsibility if he renounces his anger and tries to avoid it affecting his future actions.

The sketch needs to be filled in more fully to determine whether the action is truly anomalous or “external” to the agent or if, perhaps in spite of himself, the agent is identified with the action (even if he does not identify with it). Frankfurt is aware of the potential for

---

<sup>53</sup> Jaworska, “Caring and Internality,” 537.

<sup>54</sup> If this is right, then identification may be setting the bar too high for autonomy. In “Self-Conception and Self-Deception,” we will discuss in more detail the role that our identifying with something should play in questions of autonomy and authenticity.

<sup>55</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 7.

“moral evasion” his account of free action invites.<sup>56</sup> But I am slower to grant or deny “agential authority” to a desire on the basis of one’s professed self-conception than Frankfurt seems to be. On my account, the man who is surprised at his own temper could still be autonomous in the tantrum. Because our lives can be organized around practical identities that we might not identify with, we can find ourselves acting on reasons flowing from our practical identity that we might experience as, in some sense, external.

When we act against our (alleged) cares or higher-order desires, Frankfurt too quickly absolves us of responsibility for our actions. That is, when what we care about or our higher-order desires are unable to influence our actions in the way we would like, Frankfurt claims that the motivationally effective passions are external to us and we, therefore, are not responsible for “their ongoing presence in our psychic history, or for any conduct to which [they] may lead.”<sup>57</sup> He preemptively acknowledges in “Identification and Externality” that such an approach could seem too accommodating of “shabbily insincere devices for obtaining unmerited indulgence . . . [thereby] providing people with opportunities for moral evasion.”<sup>58</sup> But the worry persists that externality and, thereby, exculpation comes too easily. We should be slow to let ourselves off of the hook for actions resulting from passions we wish we didn’t have.

On Frankfurt’s view, self-deception and even garden-variety self-ignorance could undermine autonomy. If I think I care about my family more than work, I might experience

---

<sup>56</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 62.

<sup>57</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 62, 63.

the motivations to stay late at the office as external.<sup>59</sup> But if I find myself consistently staying late at the office and avoiding family life, maybe it's my experience I should question. When the motivationally effective desire is one I experience as external, there is a temptation to claim it is not really me. But this is a mistake. My experiencing something as external does not make it so. Frankfurt is right to acknowledge the degree to which our normative landscapes are shaped by the things we care about—whether an abstract ideal or something as tangible as a friend or lover. But he too quickly grants us a sort of reflective authority over what we in fact care about or what desires we think are really ours.

If our reasons for action and autonomy are ultimately grounded in what we love and what we care about, then Frankfurt's view is susceptible to the fact that we can find ourselves loving and caring about things that we wish we didn't. Say I see myself as a devoted husband and father, sincerely believing that these relationships and the obligations that stem from them are more important than anything else. I could experience the desire to stay late at the office as a distraction, and the desire for recognition as something that isn't really me. But if the chance to take on extra responsibilities comes, I could find myself building a life in which my career and not my family takes priority. Let's stipulate that these are clearly non-essential responsibilities but with great potential for professional recognition. I could experience the desire to stay late as external to me (alien to what I *really* care about) and continue to sincerely claim that what really matters to me is family. I could even have

---

<sup>59</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel discusses this sort of experience: "I say I value family over work. When I stop and think about it, it seems to me vastly more important to be a good father than to write papers like this one. Yet I am off to work early, I come home late. I take family vacations and my mind is wandering in the philosopher's ether. I am more elated by my rising prestige than by my son's successes in school." Eric Schwitzgebel, "Self-Ignorance," in *Consciousness and the Self*. Eds. JeeLoo Liu and John Perry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 193.

appropriate family-related second-order desires, wanting to want spend time with my family, for example. But as I consistently and (at least to an external observer) strategically avoid family-related obligations in order to climb the professional ladder, these actions seem very much my doing.

Frankfurt problematically blurs ontological and subjective identification and this makes it hard for him to properly explain this type of case. When we sincerely want to care about something and think that it should occupy a central portion of our life, we can be slow to recognize when it is other desires or cares that are in fact taking priority in our practical reasoning. But if our capacity for reflexivity is essentially human, our capacity for self-ignorance and self-deception seems to be nearly as ubiquitous.<sup>60</sup> The family-loving workaholic's work-related actions are plenty autonomous. Even if he really cares about his family, his actions are being guided by a practical identity that is very much his own, even if he wishes it wasn't. In short, it is worrisome for an account of agency if our agency can be undermined with something that is as common as our poor self-knowledge.

### **III.b. The All-Things-Considered, Evaluative Model (Watson)**

Another influential approach in discussions of autonomy rejects the idea that desires will get the job done when it comes to autonomy. If we are trying to understand autonomy in terms of desires, why should any particular desire have privileged status in deciding whether one is self-governing? In "Free Agency," Gary Watson questions the account of agential authority based on Frankfurt's hierarchical approach. As Watson puts it, "the 'structural' feature to

---

<sup>60</sup> Herbert Fingarette starts the Introduction to *Self-Deception* making a similar observation: "Were a portrait of man to be drawn, one in which there would be highlighted whatever is most human, be it noble or ignoble, we should surely place well in the foreground man's enormous capacity for self-deception." Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2000), 1.

which Frankfurt appeals is not the fundamental feature for either free agency or personhood; it is simply insufficient for the task he wants it to perform.”<sup>61</sup> Dividing the soul into higher-order and lower-order desires will not do all that Frankfurt wants it to. Watson thinks it is unclear why higher-order desires should enjoy special status as speaking for the agent. Adding more desires (even if higher-order desires) only “increase[s] the number of contenders; it is not to give a special place to any of those in contention.”<sup>62</sup> If I have a first-order desire to eat the brownie and a second-order desire to not be motivated by the desire for the brownie, it is unclear (without further explanation) that *I* should be identified with my second-order desire and not my first-order desire. Watson does think that there is something with which, as agents, we are unavoidably identified. But instead of higher-order desires, he thinks it is our valuational system.

That is why Watson thinks free action happens when there is harmony between an agent’s valuational system and motivational system. The valuational system of an agent, as Watson defines it, “is that set of considerations which, when combined with his factual beliefs . . . yields judgments of the form: the thing for me to do in these circumstances, all things considered, is *a* [a certain action].”<sup>63</sup> Sometimes I can judge that the thing to do is eat the brownie. But if I have decided and committed to cut back on sweets in the interest of better health, my valuational system yields the judgment that the thing to do is not to eat the plate of brownies (but perhaps have carrots instead). The motivational system of an agent,

---

<sup>61</sup> Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” in *Agency and Answerability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28. “Free Agency” was originally published in *Journal of Philosophy* 72(8), 205-220.

<sup>62</sup> Watson, “Free Agency,” 28.

<sup>63</sup> Watson, “Free Agency,” 25.

on the other hand, is the “set of considerations which move [the agent] to action.”<sup>64</sup> The anticipated taste of the brownie and my desire for culinary pleasure could lead me to polish off the plate, whether or not I have decided to eat fewer brownies. We act freely, on Watson’s account, when our motivational system and our valuational system align. When in the interest of health I judge that the best thing to do in a certain situation is to not eat the brownie and I am (successfully) motivated to act on that judgment, I act freely. Watson thinks we act unfreely, on the other hand, to the extent that our valuational system and motivational system do not line up: “the possibility of unfree action consists in the fact that an agent’s valuational system and motivational system may not *completely* coincide.”<sup>65</sup> The free agent is one who “has the capacity to translate his values into action; his actions flow from his evaluational system.”<sup>66</sup>

Watson describes the desired mesh in the following way: “Those systems harmonize to the extent that what determines the agent’s all-things-considered judgments also determines his actions.”<sup>67</sup> These “all-things-considered judgments” are the output of the evaluative system. I act freely to the extent that I act according to my “all-things-considered judgments.” Why the privilege granted to our valuational system? *Pace* Frankfurt, unlike desires of different orders, Watson thinks one cannot completely dissociate oneself from one’s valuational system. We can dissociate ourselves from some values only from the

---

<sup>64</sup> Watson, “Free Agency,” 25.

<sup>65</sup> Watson, “Free Agency,” 25, emphasis mine.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, “Free Agency,” 26. There is a gap here. Someone could have the capacity to translate his values into action while failing to do so. The free agent, then, could be one who has the capacity while the autonomous agent is one who exercises that capacity.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, “Free Agency,” 25-26.



vantage point of other values. Without some such perspective or normative judgments, the agent would lose her identity as an agent.<sup>68</sup> That is not to say we must have only one standpoint or that our standpoints are completely determinate. Much of the time, we probably occupy multiple standpoints. Since we're talking about eating, it seems plausible to value one's health while also valuing eating food that tastes good. Of course nutritious food can taste good and food being nutritionally poor is no guarantee of tastiness. When I go out to eat, then, I can simultaneously value eating nutritiously and eating something that tastes good. If this happens, I act freely to the extent that I eat something that is healthy and tasty. And I act unfreely to the extent that what I eat doesn't coincide with these two values I have. Say I go in wanting to order a tasty (and nutritious) salad. But as the waiter talks through the options and as people at the table place their orders, another of my values comes into effect. Imagine I care a lot about being original when ordering. Someone starts by ordering the salad I have in mind and then options dwindle further as people place their orders. By the time it gets to me, I see nothing on the menu that seems both tasty and nutritious that hasn't already been ordered. Depending on the size of the group, it could even be that there is nothing that satisfies either criterion. As a result, I order something that is neither tasty nor nutritious. It does have the virtue that no one has yet ordered it. But part of me suspects there is a reason no one ordered it. And even though I often describe it to others and myself

---

<sup>68</sup> Watson, "Free Agency," 26. In the opening chapters of *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor similarly argues that "selfhood and the good . . . turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes." Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 3. Strong evaluation, which involves "discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged" are essential to human agency (4). He thinks that doing without the normative frameworks provided by such strong evaluations "would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged personhood." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

as the desire to be original, I know that my aversion to ordering the same dish as someone else really shouldn't carry as much weight as it does. On Watson's account, in this sort of situation, to the extent that I act against my all-things-considered judgment about what would be best to do, I act unfreely.

Watson's view connects to our desiderata of agential unity in two ways. First, because we act freely as we act in accordance with our valuational capacities, acting according to values unifies us across time. Of course, our values will probably change over time. But because we are valuing creatures, it is from the perspective of some (potentially core) values that we revise others. The crucial point, though, is not the substance of the values but our capacity for valuing. Second, following a common reading of Plato's *Republic*, on Watson's account, we are free as agents when our valuational capacities are in harmony with our motivational capacities. When our different capacities are in harmony, we are unified as agents at a given time and can act freely.<sup>69</sup> Further, as with Plato, it is the rational, evaluative capacity that guides the agent in free action and action is unfree when other motivational sources take the reins. By emphasizing the evaluative system as something from which the agent cannot dissociate himself, Watson thinks he gives a better account of agential authority than Frankfurt's hierarchical model.

But Watson's view is not without its own challenges. For different reasons, Watson's view struggles to adequately account for autonomy in some of the same cases as Frankfurt, or so I will argue. One challenge results from the fact that our judgments of value

---

<sup>69</sup> In "The Constitutional Model" (Chapter 7) of *Self-Constitution*, Christine Korsgaard also develops an account of action that requires unity as discussed in *The Republic*. Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 152 in particular.

(sometimes radically) underdetermine the contours of a life.<sup>70</sup> We can judge many things to be valuable without thinking that they ought to figure prominently in our lives. And even as we decide from among valuable options, we can (arguably freely) pursue things we judge to be less valuable than others.

Watson himself recognizes a second challenge, which regards the potential gap between our judgments of value and our motivation in “Free Action and Free Will.” In it, he dismisses his earlier account of valuing as “altogether too rationalistic.”<sup>71</sup> He thinks it conflates valuing and judging good. We can be motivated to do and even value things we do not judge good or most worthwhile. As Watson puts it:

“When it comes right down to it, I might fully ‘embrace’ a course of action I do not judge best; it may not be thought best, but is fun, or thrilling; one loves doing it, and it’s too bad it’s not also the best thing to do, but one goes for it without compunction. Perhaps in such a case one must see this thrilling thing as good, must value it; but, again, one needn’t see it as expressing or even conforming to a general standpoint one would be prepared to defend. One may think it is after all rather mindless, or vulgar, or demeaning, but when it comes down to it, one is not (as) interested in that.”<sup>72</sup>

Watson calls these perverse cases, when an agent’s actions reflect (or reveal) what she finds herself valuing, but when what she values does not reflect what she judges best. In his early account, Watson connected valuing with judgments of value, which depend on “those principles and ends which [we]—in a cool and non-self-deceptive moment—articulat[e] as

---

<sup>70</sup> This concern is raised by Bratman, Seidman, and Fischer. Michael Bratman, “Autonomy and Hierarchy,” *Structures of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 165-166; Jeffrey Seidman, “Valuing and Caring,” *Theoria* 75(4), 272-303; John Martin Fischer, “What Moral Responsibility is Not,” MS.

<sup>71</sup> Gary Watson, “Free Action and Free Will,” in *Agency and Answerability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 168.

<sup>72</sup> Watson, “Free Action and Free Will,” 168.

definitive of the good, fulfilling, and defensible life.”<sup>73</sup> In his later account, valuing is more expansive. I can value things I find pleasurable, exciting, or that I care about, even if do not think they are the best things out there. Valuing (as opposed to merely judging something to be valuable) also requires a certain engagement with the object being valued. I can judge theoretical physics or Bach’s fugues to be valuable even if I do not engage with them in any meaningful way. And alternatively, I can value—that is, engage in valuing ways—things I don’t judge particularly valuable. Admittedly, consistently distinguishing between “what one values” and “what one judges valuable” can be difficult, even if the notions are (arguably) conceptually distinct.<sup>74</sup> For example, how should we determine what someone values? For argument’s sake, let’s say that we can rely on testimony to determine what an agent judges to be valuable.<sup>75</sup> And if valuing requires a certain type of engagement, our best option may seem to be reading an agent’s values off of behavior.

---

<sup>73</sup> This formulation is Gary Watson’s in “Free Agency,” *Agency and Answerability*, 25. Later, Watson rejects this as “altogether too rationalistic.” Watson, “Free Action and Free Will,” 168.

<sup>74</sup> The phrase “finds oneself valuing” is an attempt to bring out this distinction. But it has the drawback of making it sound too passive, as if we are overwhelmed by and not complicit in the valuing process. Of course, much of the time we do find ourselves valuing things in a much more passive way (at least originally). Our tastes and preferences and key parts of our moral outlook are often significantly shaped well before we start taking an active part in the process. But we do play some part in orienting ourselves in a value-laden world.

<sup>75</sup> This is, of course, contentious. Depending on how we understand judgments, we can be mistaken about the way we judge things. Eric Schwitzgebel uses the example of Juliet the implicit racist. Juliet professes to believe that there is no difference in intelligence between different races, but she is “systematically racist in most of her spontaneous reactions.” For example, she feels more surprise at intelligent comments made by black students. Schwitzgebel, “Acting Contrary to Our Professed Beliefs or the Gulf Between Occurrent Judgment and Dispositional Belief,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91(4): 531-553.

But if we look to behavior, we sometimes find ourselves valuing things that we may not judge to be all that worthwhile. Or even if we judge them to have some value, we can act in ways that give them more or less weight than we think we should. Things can draw our attention and sway our practical reasoning and motivational processes more than we think they merit.

The concern that judgments of value underdetermine the contours of our lives is closely related.<sup>76</sup> There is much of value in the world—humanitarian causes, scientific discovery, art, and human love, just to name a few examples. We can judge these and many other things to be valuable. And we could be disposed to judge even more things to be valuable if we knew more about them. But as finite creatures, we cannot engage with all valuable things. So we choose to value some things, engaging with them as valuable by taking them as giving us reasons to act in certain ways.<sup>77</sup> Because engaging with certain activities and people forecloses other possibilities, valuing some things means we cannot value others (even if we judge them to be valuable).

Michael Bratman notes that all sorts of action—including and perhaps especially major life choices about careers and relationships—are radically underdetermined by our judgments of what constitutes a good life. There are some cases in which our all-things-considered judgments do not indicate a clear path. So even if our judgments of value provide

---

<sup>76</sup> John Martin Fischer describes it in the following way: Watson “does not (here) discuss the possibility that one’s values do not specify a unique action or that perhaps one’s valuational system contains elements that are incommensurable.” Fischer, “What Moral Responsibility is Not,” 18.

<sup>77</sup> This way of putting it is too voluntaristic. There are times when we purposefully choose to value something and to engage with it in the appropriate way. But a lot of the time we find ourselves already valuing things, letting them structure our lives and give us reasons for living the way we do.

a framework, things beyond our judgments of value shape the contours of our lives.<sup>78</sup> A person's judgments of value, for example, may not decisively support becoming a physician instead of a professor or becoming a graphic designer rather than a band teacher. The individual could judge both options to be of roughly equal value. The different paths may be attractive in different, perhaps incomparable ways—say, the salary of a physician versus the flexibility of a professor. If we apply Watson's early model to cases of underdetermination, the person seems doomed to unfree action, since one's all-things-considered value judgment does not yield a clear decision. But calling such actions unfree seems counter-intuitive. At least unreflectively, the fact that our value-judgments do not clearly specify a course seems to increase the agent's freedom in pursuing one path over another.

These two challenges are related. The first stems from the distinction between valuing something and judging something to be valuable. The second results from fact that value judgments underdetermine the contours of a life. In both cases, the problem arises when we place too much weight in our judgments of value, particularly when we understand judgments of value as judgments made in a cool, all-things-considered way. As agents, we can freely go against our all-things-considered judgments. We can even embrace such a course of action and hold to it in the way required by autonomy.

Judgments of value can act as scaffolding as we build our lives, giving general guidelines and provide initial shape. We start with some conception of a rich and satisfying life. But usually our conceptions are broad enough that many actions and pursuits qualify as valuable. Typically, the good life is thought to involve things like family, community

---

<sup>78</sup> Michael Bratman, *Structures of Agency*, 165-166, 174-175, 310.

involvement, career success, developing one's talents, recreation, bodily pleasures, moral goodness, beauty, artistic creation, and spiritual devotion.

These elements do not always conflict. But they can. And when they do, what is the effect of this tension on an individual's agency and autonomy? Sometimes one thing trumps another. Feeding my children takes precedence over watching a basketball game. But sometimes two things central to our lives can conflict more deeply. There can be real tensions between work and family if someone deeply values both. No matter the choice, the agent sacrifices something she values and this can lead to ambivalence about whatever is chosen.<sup>79</sup> Imagine I care deeply about my work and my family. Both matter to me and I consider both valuable. But if I were pressed, I would say family is more important than work. What happens when these conflict? Say I have a family obligation the same night I receive a pressing deadline at work and I work late at the expense of my family obligation.<sup>80</sup> Things like this happen all the time. We find ourselves pulled between two (or more) things we care about and consider worthwhile. The conflict can also be between something we judge to be valuable and something we are drawn to but do not find particularly worthwhile.

---

<sup>79</sup> One could think ambivalence undermines autonomy. How can I be genuinely autonomous, the argument goes, when I am genuinely torn with regard to the priority of two competing values? Which value speaks for the agent?

<sup>80</sup> In *My Struggle*, Karl Ove Knausgaard goes the other direction in the conflict between work and family: "And when what has kept me going for the whole of my adult life, the ambition to write something exceptional one day, is threatened in this way my one thought, which gnaws at me like a rat, is that I have to escape. Time is slipping away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I . . . do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children in the play areas, bring them home, undress them, bathe them, look after them until it is bedtime, tuck them in, hang some clothes to dry, fold others, and put them away, tidy up, wipe tables, chairs, and cupboards." Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book I*, 32. He loves his children "with all [his] heart," but, for him, "the meaning they produce is not sufficient to fulfill a whole life. Not [his], at any rate." Knausgaard, *My Struggle, Book I*, 36.

What would Watson's view in "Free Agency" have to say about this sort of case? It would depend on the verdict of my all-things-considered judgment about what to do in the situation. If my all-things-considered judgment is that it would be best to be with my family (evaluational system) but I find myself in the office finishing the project (motivational system), then I act unfreely. But this seems strange. Of course, if it is an aberration, then maybe I am acting unfreely, succumbing to work pressures. But if my professional work is an important part of my practical identity, something that I typically take to give me strong reasons to act, then it seems that I am still autonomous when I choose to stay late at the office. I just happen to govern myself in ways that go against my all-things-considered judgment. It would be another thing if, as I am about to leave to coach my child's basketball game, I decide to check on recent posts on social media and news websites and lose track of time. In such a case, it is less clear I am acting autonomously. But in this case, it isn't just that I am going against my all-things-considered judgments about what is most valuable. Instead, it is that I am acting on reasons that are not central to my practical identity.

As I described the work/family scenario, I judge both pursuits (work and family) to be valuable, but I find one (family) more important in this instance (even though I act against that judgment). But there are a slew of other cases in which I judge only one option to be valuable but "without compunction" find myself taking the other course. Sometimes I judge both paths to be valuable yet choose the one I judge less valuable; sometimes I judge one to be valuable but pursue without reservation the other. For better or worse, I think both types of cases are commonplace in our lives and, further, we do a disservice to our understanding of our capacity to direct our actions when we characterize these as non-autonomous, and this is what Watson's all-things-considered judgment view does.



There is a long tradition of thinking that we are rational creatures and that we act autonomously when we effectively bring about what our rational judgments recommend. But there is also a long tradition that believes truly free action requires harmony between our various faculties. And even if we think our rational judgments should enjoy pride of place, it is unclear that we should identify our practical judgments with our calm, all-things-considered judgments about the best thing to do in a given situation. Understanding autonomy in terms of practical identity can do justice to the idea that autonomy, properly understood, involves psychological harmony while still giving reason a critical role. A broader conception of our practical identities thus allows for a broader conception of our practical judgments while explaining the role our all-things-considered judgments can play in our agency.

Remember that Frankfurt also would say that we do not act autonomously when we choose work over family in the case above. We would need to flesh out the details a bit more, but if in this instance I identify with my desire to put family first over the desire to thrive professionally, then I act unfreely when I act on the desire to finish the work project. Because the process of identification depends on how I experience the desire in a particular situation, I could experience the work desire as external because I am trying to recommit myself to my family. But in such a case, it seems overly generous and misleading to say that the agent acts unfreely in choosing to work just because he experiences the work desire as external. Claiming I act non-autonomously and thereby absolving me of my moral responsibility seems misguided.

We can autonomously do things that, on some level, we wish we didn't and even as we pursue things that are not, even by our own lights, the best. We can be self-governing

even when we do not govern ourselves well. We can effectively direct the course of our lives, even if we do not always direct it in ways we think are best. And both Frankfurt and Watson (to my mind, problematically) seem to rule out that possibility.

#### **IV. Autonomy and Practical Identity**

I propose that we should understand autonomy as a matter of acting in conformity with our practical identities. One acts autonomously, then, to the extent that one acts in conformity with or that one's actions flow from one's practical identity.<sup>81</sup> As I described it earlier, a practical identity, on my account, is a conjunct of the roles, desires, values, and characteristics that give us consistent reasons to act and around which we structure our lives. But I believe we can structure our lives around desires, roles, characteristics, and values that we do not (and perhaps would not) reflectively endorse. Practical identities, then, manifest what we value, shape the way we value, and give us reasons to act in certain ways. In this section I argue that defining autonomy in terms of practical identity allows us to better explain autonomy in cases like the conflicted father. It can also show how someone like Javert could be autonomous, even if he were to try to return to his earlier, simpler practical identity, potentially against his second-order desires and his all-things-considered judgment.

Even though my conception of autonomy is different from hers, I draw from Christine Korsgaard's account of practical identities. In *Sources of Normativity*, Korsgaard defines the conception of one's practical identity as "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to

---

<sup>81</sup> Conformity with and "flowing from" suggest something more than mere agreement between an individual's actions and those recommended by a practical identity. The agreement between actions and practical identity must come in the right way. For this reason, cases of coercion, manipulation, and hypnosis undermine autonomy.

be worth undertaking.”<sup>82</sup> She describes some examples in the following way: “You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone’s lover or friend, and so on.”<sup>83</sup> These identities give us reasons and obligations. As a parent, I have reason to promote my child’s well-being. And being a professor gives me reasons to teach and write.<sup>84</sup> To the extent that I read a bedtime story with my child or cook a meal for my family *because* I am a parent, I act autonomously. These are relatively simple cases, however, and practical identities are complex. I could have previously promised to help my child with a school project over the weekend only to be asked to travel on Friday to meet an urgent work deadline. Governing actions in conformity with a practical identity is difficult in part because our practical identities are complex, potentially conflicting, and these conflicts can be between incomparable values and desires.

Throughout most of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, we see a fairly simple practical identity in Inspector Javert, whose identity as an enforcer of the law and righteousness (as he conceives it) has become all-consuming. His actions are guided by his unbending allegiance to the law. Javert is autonomous as an agent to the extent that he acts in accordance to the practical identity that structures his life. Toward the end of the novel, however, Javert’s life is complicated when Jean Valjean spares his life. He finds himself trying to decide whether to

---

<sup>82</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101. My use of “autonomy” is closer to Korsgaard’s “efficacy” in *Self-Constitution*.

<sup>83</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>84</sup> Our practical identities can be varied, sometimes pulling us in different directions. Korsgaard sometimes suggests that in such cases it is unclear it is really the person acting, because, following Plato’s position in the *Republic*, the agent is not yet unified and so cannot function as a whole.

let Valjean go free or to go arrest him once and for all. What would have once been a clear straightforward decision causes great distress. The once hegemonic practical identity of police Inspector asks, “Is there anything else in the world besides tribunals, sentences, police, and authority?”<sup>85</sup> From one perspective, “It was clear that [having Valjean arrested] was what he must do.”<sup>86</sup> And for the majority of Javert’s life, that perspective, that practical identity, was all there was.

But that is not the case anymore:

“For some hours Javert had ceased to be uncomplicated. He was troubled; this brain, so limpid in its blindness, had lost its transparency; there was a cloud in this crystal. Javert felt that the sense of duty was coming apart in his conscience, and he could not hide it from himself. . . . Before him he saw two roads, both equally straight; but he did see two; and that terrified him—he who had never in his life known anything but one straight line. And, bitter anguish, these two roads were contradictory. One of these straight lines excluded the other. Which of the two was the true one?”<sup>87</sup>

Javert had for so long been guided by his sense of duty, acting consistently and inflexibly according to what his duty as an inspector required. But now something bars him from acting in accordance to his duty.<sup>88</sup> What once would have been a clear-cut decision brings him to his knees. Prior to this crisis, assessing Javert’s agential autonomy would have been straightforward; now, it becomes more difficult. But as his practical identity becomes more complex, it opens more ways in which he can act autonomously.

---

<sup>85</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 1321.

<sup>86</sup> Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1321.

<sup>87</sup> Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1320.

<sup>88</sup> Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1321.

By bringing the discussion to the level of practical identities we better allow for tensions that can persist in autonomous agency. At least sometimes, we can be autonomous when we act on reasons stemming from peripheral aspects of our practical identities even if it is at the expense of something we take to be more central. In addition to the consistent, self-disciplined, and virtuous, the umbrella of autonomy should have room for some instances of the out-of-character and the in-spite-of-myself. Each of these requires some explanation because they may seem to go against autonomy. For example, if I do something “in spite of myself,” how can that be considered self-governing? And if something is out of character, how am I the one acting? Is it not just a blip in my agential history? This is a real worry. In our efforts to cast a broader net, we could end up catching any and all manner of actions. If all actions are autonomous, then autonomy loses its appeal—“autonomous agency” becomes redundant. Going forward, I hope to show that autonomy is more pervasive than some prevailing theorists admit without draining autonomy of its intuitive appeal and explanatory power. We can be self-governing even when we do not govern according to what we think is best.

Someone could be self-governing and act according to a practical identity he has (on some level) embraced, even if he has (perhaps tacit) reservations about the overall value of the life. Frankfurt’s model too quickly allows for certain actions to be considered external to an agent, too readily describes such agents as passive bystanders to these actions and the passions that motivate them.<sup>89</sup> This is especially the case when an agent does something that they do not approve of. But moral lapses often are all the more frustrating because when we

---

<sup>89</sup> J. David Velleman goes a similar direction in his discussion of Freud knocking his inkstand to the ground. J. David Velleman, “Introduction,” *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 2-3.

are self-governing when we do them. Frankfurt is right to note that sometimes these actions frustrate us because they do not reflect who we really are or because we are passive to them. But other times they bother us precisely because they are deeply ours—reflecting (or revealing) who we are and because we are active participants in them. Such actions reflect who we are; we just wish we were (and perhaps believe that we are) different. In “Self-Conception and Self-Deception,” we will discuss in more detail our response to actions we wish weren’t ours, as well as the relationship between one’s practical identity and one’s self-conception.

Although Billy Joel probably overstates it when he claims mistakes are “the only things that you can truly call your own,” there is something to the idea that mistakes, instances of self-deception, and cases in which our actions fail to live up to our self-conceptions can be revelatory.<sup>90</sup> They can show us who we are as autonomous agents. Not that they show us some deep self that our typical behavior covers up. But our practical lives can be shaped by identities of which we are not entirely aware and that we may not fully approve of or identify with. These gaps between who we think we are (our self-conception) and the identities that shape and guide our actions can reveal our complexity as human beings. These gaps can, of course, go both ways. Even if the trend is to focus on cases in which we fall short of our self-conceptions—cheating on diets, spouses, or exams, or losing tempers in moments when we think we’d be more level-headed—sometimes we are better than we think we are.<sup>91</sup> Certain levels of self-deception or self-ignorance surely affect one’s

---

<sup>90</sup> Billy Joel, “You’re Only Human (Second Wind)”

<sup>91</sup> Recall Kevin Tobia’s claim in “Personal Identity and the Phineas Gage Effect.” There are also cases like Huck Finn, in which agents seemingly act virtuously akratically, doing what is

life, but it seems that I can be self-governing even as I am to some degree mistaken about the sort of person I am.

This approach could seem wrong-headed or to sidestep the issue. What will speak for where I stand as an agent if not my self-conception? Well, largely, what I do. My starting point for who we are as agents is what we do. This may seem to beg the question if we are trying to determine what speaks for us as agents in order to explain why some actions are more ours than others. But not everything that I do reflects my practical identity. The way I twirl my pen while thinking need not flow from my practical identity. But there are different aspects of our lives that we take efforts to maintain and that we take to give us reasons to act. Often this happens as a result of a conscious identification with a given role or project or desire. For example, because I identify as a father, I see some things as giving me reasons that I wouldn't otherwise have. And if I were to start to lose motivation as a parent, insofar as I continue to identify as a parent, I would have a reason to bolster my flagging motivation. But with the father with family/work tension, his practical identity as a dedicated employee can structure his life in myriad ways even if he doesn't consciously identify as very devoted to his work.

We can come to have or inhabit practical identities in a variety of ways. Some elements of my practical identity are (at least in part) genetic; others are the result of cultural inheritance or upbringing; still others I have chosen purposefully. These can be intertwined. I can purposefully choose to marry and have a family, for example, even if the way I value

---

right even as they think they are doing something they shouldn't. Nomy Arpaly, "Huckleberry Finn Revisited: Inverse Akrasia and Moral Ignorance." In *The Nature of Moral Responsibility*, Edited by Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, and Angela M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 141-156.

these things is in part due to my upbringing. Because practical identities are complex, we can autonomously act in ways that we do not fully endorse as the best thing to do in a given situation. Sometimes that is because there is not a clear judgment about what the best thing to do is. But it also can happen when different aspects of our practical identity pull us in different directions and we follow the one that we would not judge best, all things considered.

Earlier we discussed the father trying to balance family and work. I can be deeply committed to scholarship and the life of a professor—teaching, writing, and service—and see this as a crucial element of the good life. I can also care deeply about my family and want to help my wife and children flourish. These aspects of my life can conflict. I could have a prestigious and lucrative job offer. But the job could be in a location that would require my wife’s career to suffer and/or would involve moving away from friends and family. Or maybe educational opportunities for my children would not be as good. In this situation, I would be torn between two things I judge valuable, each of which I see as central to a rich life. There may be no clear answer to the question, “What do you think is the best path?”

Remember Korsgaard’s conception of practical identity as a description under which we value ourselves. If valuing something is to see it as giving you reasons for action, then you can value yourself under a given description—seeing yourself as having reasons to act that are guided by that identity—even if you are not entirely comfortable with the description (or aware that the description fits). I can see myself as having reasons to act like a workaholic—taking on extra projects, staying late at the office unnecessarily, and so forth—even if I do not think I am a workaholic. I could be confused about what it means to be a workaholic. Or I could be self-ignorant, either about my judgments/attitudes or about my



actions. With regard to my judgments/attitudes, I could mistakenly think that the values or patterns of behavior typical of workaholics do not fit me (when they actually do). I can “be identified with” a certain desire/reason/principle if it plays a certain role in my life or psychology, even if I do not “identify with it,” which requires taking a certain kind of subjective attitude toward it.<sup>92</sup> But I could also be (on some level) ignorant about my tendency to stay late, to take on extra projects, and to ceaselessly check my email.

I agree with Korsgaard that our reasons to act depend on our practical identities. She goes on to argue that the particular ties associated with our robust practical identities—as parents, partners, neighbors, and friends to particular people, citizens of particular countries, members of professions, and as people having different interests and hobbies—derive their normativity from a more fundamental conception of our identities.<sup>93</sup> She thinks we must have some conception of our practical identity, because without it we wouldn’t have reasons to act, and as the reflective creatures we are, we need reasons.<sup>94</sup> But most of our self-conceptions are contingent.<sup>95</sup> “What is not contingent,” she thinks, “is that you must be guided by some conception of your practical identity.”<sup>96</sup> And this reason to conform to a particular practical identity comes from our humanity itself—from our identity as a human being—and not from any particular, complex identity.

---

<sup>93</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 119, 129.

<sup>94</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 123.

<sup>95</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 120.

<sup>96</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 120.

Korsgaard uses this intermediate conclusion to go on to show that our rational, practical nature commits us to morality, specifically, that acting autonomously requires us to act in accordance with the categorical imperative.<sup>97</sup> According to this argument, “if we do not treat our humanity as a normative identity, none of our other identities can be normative, and then we can have no reasons to act at all.”<sup>98</sup> This is a strong claim and I think it goes too far. It seems to suggest that, for any of our particular, practical identities to be normative and to give us reasons to act, we must in fact treat our humanity as a normative identity (or aspect of our identity) and also, on pain of contradiction, treat others in the way required by their human identity. It might be right that we are rationally committed to respecting the humanity in ourselves and in others, and it could be true that this more fundamental identity undergirds our more robust and particular practical identities. But there is a big step from a rational commitment and being disposed to value humanity in this way to it actually factoring in our practical reasoning.

For Korsgaard, the more contingent aspects of our practical identities are grounded in our more universal humanity and its distinctive reflective nature. More specifically, an important difference between Korsgaard’s account and mine is not so much in the nature of the grounding relationship but in the way the agent must appreciate the grounding relationship in order for her more robust (but largely contingent) practical identity to be normative. As Korsgaard frames it, it is our recognition that the normativity of our

---

<sup>97</sup> See also Korsgaard, *Self Constitution*, 82-84, in which she describes autonomy and efficacy as the essential characteristics of an agent. On her Kantian view, the categorical imperative commands us to be autonomous and the hypothetical imperative commands us to be efficacious.

<sup>98</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 129.

contingent practical identities depends on an inescapable identity as human (as beings who need reasons) that makes our practical identities normative. Thus it is by valuing our humanity (universally construed) that we are able to value anything. A lot hinges on whether this valuing is actual or dispositional. Even if the more contingent aspects of our practical identities—the things that make them the rich and complicated things they are—are ultimately grounded in our natures as valuing and reflective beings, it matters a lot whether this recognition need be actual or if it can be dispositional in order for my more particular practical identity to be properly normative. I can be disposed to value my humanity in general while failing to explicitly or consciously doing so. And if this is right, a more contingent identity can be actually normative and grounded in my humanity even if I fail to act in ways that would be required by my commitment to my (in some sense) more fundamental identity as human.

When we act in accordance with our practical identities, taking the reasons they give us as normative and acting accordingly, we act autonomously. But what does it mean to act in accordance with a practical identity, given that we are complex individuals, for example, at once a spouse, parent, teacher, and scholar, just to name a few? Practical identities polarize our worlds. They make some things show up as important and some actions as to be done. Because I have the practical identity of parent, I have reasons to take an interest in things that I wouldn't otherwise. If my child takes an interest in a certain game or book, I have a reason to take some interest in the activity. My reasons related to that activity are probably different from my child's—I probably don't have overriding reasons to collect the same cards my children do. And the reasons I have as a result of my practical identity do not always take a positive form. Because I am committed to my relationship with my wife, I have

reason not to pursue other romantic possibilities. In this way, our practical identities polarize our world and valence things and activities in positive and negative ways. Being married or being a parent, for example, makes some things show up as to be done and others show up as not to be done. Formulating things simply as “to be done” or “not to be done” is a bit crude, however. Usually things do not show up as to be done or not to be done full stop. More often, they show up as more or less justified, more or less attractive. And our worlds can be polarized in orthogonal and sometimes conflicting ways. Because our identities are complex, it is not only as parent *or* teacher that the world shows up. Instead, it is through the lens of parent, teacher, food lover, *and* someone concerned about health that the world is colored. I could be drawn to eat a tasty dessert while also wondering about the health consequences.

And this process is in flux. Before going to a party with friends, given his work and family commitments, Tim could see having a martini as, on balance, “not to be done.” Even if he thinks the drink itself would be enjoyable, the balance of his reasons is on the side of refraining. As he is at the party, however, the world can start to appear differently. The cares of work and family lose their urgency, and the allure of the drink and perhaps the value he places on socializing increases. The balance of reasons can shift as the considerations in favor of having a drink (to borrow Scanlon’s formulation of reasons) come to outweigh those in favor of refraining.<sup>99</sup> Or, returning to the images of polarization, the drink could come to show up more as “to be had” than “to be refused.” If Tim has the drink, does he

---

<sup>99</sup> In *What We Owe to Each Other*, T.M. Scanlon defines a reason for something as “a consideration that counts in favor of it.” Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 17.

act autonomously? Do his actions conform to the way his practical identity polarizes the world?

Let's imagine Tim is a newly committed teetotaler and a recovering alcoholic. Both of these practical identities give him reasons to act and influence the way the options appear. As a newly committed teetotaler, he has reason not to have the drink and sees the drink as not be had, because it goes against his commitments and the teetotaler aspect of his identity. But as a recovering alcoholic, he also feels the allure of the drink, because he is in an important way identified with his past desires, habits, and reasons that orient him positively toward the drink. Our practical identities involve our prior commitments and dispositions, even residual desires and values. But they also involve the moment of action—including the way the world is polarized and how we respond to that polarization—and there is a future-oriented dimension that takes into account the individual's plans, projects, goals, and the like. These temporal-orientations are intertwined and we move too quickly if we simply prioritize the moment of prior decision or the moment of action in isolation.

In such cases, I think a certain estrangement is compatible with autonomy. One can be self-governing and also be estranged from certain motivationally efficacious desires/reasons. This might seem to concede too much. What oomph is there in the concept of autonomy if we can be autonomous even when we do things we do not fully endorse? It is a more permissive account of autonomy, and this may seem to drain it of some of the appeal of the ideal of autonomy. But it also more accurately account for the richness and, sometimes, messiness of human agency. On this account, we can be autonomous even as we act on reasons or desires that we wish we didn't find compelling.

Let's return to the father with the family and work conflict. Because these are important aspects of his practical identity, even if he judges family to be more important and thinks it would be better for him to be with his family, insofar as his actions are guided by his practical identity, he acts autonomously. And this seems right. Even if he governs himself in ways that fall short of what he thinks is most worthwhile, it is still self-governance because he is acting according to an identity that, in large part, structures his life.

For Frankfurt, our second-order desire—to not find these first-order work-related desires compelling when they come into direct conflict with family—makes actions based on them non-autonomous. But this absolution comes too easily. To be sure, our ability to autonomously direct our lives into paths we wish we didn't is a thorn in the side. But one reason this thorn especially hurts is that we are behind the wheel, sometimes driving in ways we don't approve of. Understanding autonomy in terms of practical identity also explains how we can retain our autonomy in some of Watson's perverse cases. When we choose a course of action because it is thrilling or novel or comfortable, even when our all-things-considered judgments would direct us elsewhere, we may simply be acting in accordance with aspects of our practical identities that our more contemplative aspects would rather hide away. This approach recognizes the Underground Man's claim that "volition is a manifestation of the whole of life" and his desire to "live in order to satisfy all my faculties and not my reasoning faculty alone." Those "other faculties" and the not-always-well-behaved aspects of our identities can polarize our worlds in powerful ways—for better and worse—and our conception of autonomy should reflect the complexity of our desires, reason, emotions, attachments, and beliefs and the ways in which we can self-govern as we are guided by these different aspects of ourselves.

An individual's washing his hands of or deflecting praise resulting from a particular act is insufficient to absolve them of their autonomy. This way of putting it is not to conflate autonomy with moral responsibility. We can be morally responsible for non-autonomous actions. If, instead of staying and working, I plan to leave for home but get stuck checking social media and sports scores, then it's not clear that I am acting autonomously. I would likely be morally responsible for missing my family event. But it's not clear that I am autonomous.

One way to explain how we can be morally responsible but not autonomous is to describe autonomy as acting in accordance with our self-conceptions, which is a higher standard than moral responsibility. As we will see in more detail in "Self-Conception and Self-Deception," however, one's practical identity is distinct from one's self-conception, and we can autonomously act in ways that do not line up with our self-conceptions. Our self-conceptions can be inaccurate, sometimes willfully, but the inaccuracy need not be willful. And to the extent that the actions departing from our self-conceptions line up with who we are and the way the world appears to us (even if we wouldn't articulate it that way to ourselves or others), we are still acting autonomously. But we can also act in ways that are inconsistent with who we are (and not just with our self-conceptions). And in such cases, we could fail to be autonomous even while (potentially) retaining moral responsibility for such actions.

When I have a certain practical identity, I see myself as having reasons to act according to reasons the identity gives me. Following Agnieszka Jaworska, Jeffrey Seidman

describes caring as seeing something as important.<sup>100</sup> Seeing something as important—as giving me reasons to act in certain ways—is different from my believing or judging it to be important. They typically coincide because seeing something as important will incline me to also believe it is important. But they can come apart.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, I can see a practical identity as giving me reasons even if I do not believe it does. The world can show up as giving me reasons to do certain things consonant with a practical identity even if I do not believe I have that particular practical identity. My believing I do not have a short temper is not enough to change the fact that it is a distinguishing feature of mine. Self-conceptions can come apart from our practical identities, and when trying to understand autonomy, we are better served by looking at the latter than the former.

All things being equal, there is something good about honesty and correctness of beliefs. So, by extension, it seems good to have an honest or accurate self-conception—a fit between how you see yourself and how you actually are. Having an accurate sense of who you are—what you care about, what you judge to be worthwhile, what you tend to do and perhaps why—can allow you to better direct your life in accordance with the way you want your life to go. An accurate self-conception may decrease the instances when an agent experiences his passions or actions as external. This, it seems, increases our ability to guide the course of our lives. But it is more than that. As we develop more accurate self-conceptions, we are better able to align who we are with who we wish we were. If Frankfurt's agent has a temper problem but every time anger rises up in him he experiences it as external and does his best to apologize and repair the damage done, his inaccurate self-

---

<sup>100</sup> Jeffrey Seidman, "Valuing and Caring," *Theoria* 75(4): 272-303; Jaworska, "Caring and Internality."

<sup>101</sup> Seidman, "Valuing and Caring," 286-287.



conception—whether the result of motivated self-deception or something more benign—holds him back from guiding his actions in accordance with who he takes himself to be.

I could see myself as a good teacher and try to act in accordance with that self-conception, developing detailed powerpoint lectures, giving detailed feedback on student papers, and making it a point to respond quickly to student emails, except when (based on my understanding of what it is to be a good teacher) I think would be better to let the student work out the issue on his or her own. But what if the things I do as a “good teacher” actually hurt the students? Are my actions autonomous even though I misfire in being what I think I am?

Or what if (a modified) Don Juan sees himself as a committed husband and father, even though he consistently falls short of that ideal? When Don seeks out a new love interest instead of helping his daughter with her school project as he promised or when he finds himself (seemingly unwittingly) disregarding his marriage vows when convenient, how should we characterize the case?

In such cases, it is important to index autonomy to aspects of a practical identity. In cases of self-deception or self-ignorance, the person may be less autonomous as an educator or as a committed husband or father. But at the same time, he could be more autonomous when considered under different descriptions or aspects of his practical identity. In this way, someone could be very autonomous in some aspects of her life and less autonomous in others. Autonomy, then, is both scalar and relative to a practical identity. In “Why Did the Butler Do It?” we look at Mr. Stevens, whose ability to be self-governing as a butler undermines his ability to be self-governing as a son or potential lover. Being autonomous,

able to direct one's actions effectively and consistent with one's practical identity, is thus an important aspect of excellent agency, but it does not exhaust agency-at-its-best.

Chapter Two:  
Authenticity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger

The individual has always had to struggle to keep from being overwhelmed by the tribe. To be your own man is a hard business. If you try it, you'll be lonely often, and sometimes frightened. But no price is too high to pay for the privilege of owning yourself.

Rudyard Kipling<sup>102</sup>

What does your conscience say? –“You should become who you are.”  
Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>103</sup>

### I. Authenticity and Becoming a Self

Jonathan Lear begins *A Case for Irony* with Kierkegaard's claim that “to become human does not come that easily.”<sup>104</sup> Seen from a certain perspective, this idea seems puzzling, if not simply wrongheaded. Outside of discussions in evolutionary biology about the unique capacities of *Homo sapiens*, how can becoming human be difficult? Something either is or is not human. It doesn't seem like something we struggle with, something difficult to become. But at the same time, the idea that we could fall short of being our own person is familiar—both in everyday conversation and in the Western humanistic tradition. Kierkegaard is not alone in seeing becoming a self as an achievement. Kipling, for example, worries that we can fail to own ourselves by succumbing to things like the tribe, or social mores, or peer pressure. And in his discussions of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), Heidegger similarly worries

---

<sup>102</sup> Arthur Gordon, “Interview with an Immortal,” *Reader's Digest*, 1935. Later Reprinted in “Six Hours with Rudyard Kipling,” *The Kipling Journal* (June 1967).

<sup>103</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §270.

<sup>104</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 2: F-K, ed. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970), 278. The entry is from December 3, 1854.

about the potential loss of oneself.<sup>105</sup> In our everyday dealings, he thinks, we are not unique individuals; instead, we do what anyone (*das Man*) would do in a given situation. We read the books one reads, watch the movies one watches, wear the clothes one wears, listen to the music one listens to, and so forth.<sup>106</sup>

But even setting aside prominent philosophical and literary examples, the worry about living inauthentic lives is pervasive in our culture. Simon Feldman and Allan Hazlett start “What’s Bad About Bad Faith” with the basic intuition from the “contemporary common sense ethical framework” that “there is something bad about being inauthentic, and something good about authenticity.”<sup>107</sup> For example, advertising campaigns encouraging consumers to be original, authentic, or to “be yourself” are ubiquitous, even if there are slight variations among them. But if we interrogate the common hunch that authenticity is good and inauthenticity is bad, the hunch is less obviously true. It is not immediately clear why authenticity is good and why inauthenticity is bad. Why is it bad to defer to common consensus in our reading, watching, and culinary habits? It might even seem a good idea to defer to those who have acquired good taste in these areas as one seeks to become a connoisseur of literature, film, or food. And, further, because the significance of our words

---

<sup>105</sup> Despite his insistence to the contrary, it is hard not to see authenticity as better than inauthenticity.

<sup>106</sup> As Heidegger puts it: “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *das Man* takes pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *das Man* sees and judges.” Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 126-127. (As a rule, I use the Macquarrie and Robinson translation of *Being and Time*.) The prevalence and influence of websites like Rotten Tomatoes or Yelp or the way in which bestseller lists often function as buyer guides reflect this trend.

<sup>107</sup> Simon Feldman and Allen Hazlett, “What’s Bad about Bad Faith,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 21(1), 50.

and our actions are not up to us, it seems that “saying what one says” and “doing what one does” when upset or grieving or elated can be important for others to understand us.

Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger think our world is shaped by others in deep and far-reaching ways, so they distinguish between “doing what one does” in a way that makes our actions intelligible and “doing what one does” in a way that problematically defers responsibility for who we are or what we do. It is the latter that motivates worries about inauthenticity. But because intelligibility in a world shaped by others requires us to act in understandable ways, it can be hard to pin down how we can live lives truly our own when the shapes of our lives are largely not up to us. My focus in this chapter will be on Kierkegaard’s treatment of the ideal of individuality in *The Concept of Anxiety* and on Heidegger’s treatment of authenticity in *Being and Time*.<sup>108</sup>

In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard illustrates how one can fall short in the task of selfhood by discussing three problematic ways of experiencing or responding to anxiety—spiritlessness, fate, and guilt—each of which prevents agents from becoming robust individuals, or authentic selves. These approaches are tempting, though, because they seem to absolve the agent of the responsibility for the person they become.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger acknowledges that Kierkegaard has gone the furthest in “analyzing the phenomenon of anxiety,”<sup>109</sup> and he invokes a very Kierkegaardian

---

<sup>108</sup> One could ask how Kierkegaard’s notion of individuality (or “self” or “human” as an achievement) maps onto Heidegger’s notion of authenticity. An exhaustive treatment of this issue goes beyond the scope of this paper. In this paper, I hope to show that there are important overlaps in concern between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, even if their respective ideals of selfhood are not identical.

<sup>109</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 190.

description of anxiety: “Anxiety is anxious in the face of the ‘nothing’ of the world.”<sup>110</sup> For Kierkegaard and Heidegger, anxiety plays a central role in achieving the ideal of selfhood—individuality for Kierkegaard and authenticity for Heidegger. Responding to anxiety poorly can prevent us from becoming robust selves. Understanding how one could fail to become a self for Kierkegaard and Heidegger will illuminate their respective ideals of authenticity. Kierkegaard’s treatment of anxiety experienced as spiritlessness, fate, or guilt illuminates and is illuminated by Heidegger’s discussion of authenticity. And Heidegger’s discussion of authenticity and his description of the structures of human existence offer a more schematic framework for interpreting Kierkegaard’s rich illustrative examples.

I will focus on a few key ways Kierkegaard and Heidegger illuminate each other. I argue that Heidegger’s concerns about the pernicious version of *das Man* and the way in which we can avoid responsibility for our lives help show that Kierkegaard’s concerns are of broad existential and not merely religious interest.<sup>111</sup> And, alternatively, I argue that Kierkegaard’s suggestion of the potential indistinguishability between the individual who “gets it” in terms of individuality and those who fall short clarifies how, for Heidegger, authenticity is not reserved for the rugged individualist and does not require breaking out on one’s own. For both, authenticity is more a matter of how one lives a life than it is about altering the content of the life. One can authentically live a life that, from the outside, appears mundane and, alternatively, one can inauthentically live a life that appears original.

---

<sup>110</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 343.

<sup>111</sup> Here I use ‘existential’ in the sense of relating to questions like the meaning of life, death, and so forth, and not in Heidegger’s technical sense of Dasein’s way of being.

Both William Blattner and Iain Thomson have recently discussed the relationship between Kierkegaard and Heidegger in their work on authenticity, and I will suggest a couple emendations to Blattner's and Thomson's accounts. When Blattner claims that Kierkegaard's religious thought is not essential for understanding Heidegger's conception of authenticity, he underestimates Kierkegaard's influence on Heidegger and the degree to which Kierkegaard's writings already go beyond religious thought, having broader existential aims.<sup>112</sup> On the other hand, Thomson thinks that the connection between Heideggerian authenticity and Aristotelian phronesis separates Heidegger from Kierkegaard because Kierkegaard's account of individuality does not necessarily lead to an observable change in the agent.<sup>113</sup> Thomson doesn't explicitly state his justification for this view, but there is support for his interpretation of Kierkegaard.<sup>114</sup> On this point, however, I think Thomson overstates the difference between Kierkegaard and Heidegger. There are important differences between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, but on this point they are closer than Thomson suggests. That is not to say that this interpretation of Heidegger is without support. Part of that support, however, I think derives from two ambiguities in Heidegger's concept of *das Man*. First, Heidegger and those interpreting him do not always carefully distinguish between *das Man* as an existential structure and *das Man* as problematic

---

<sup>112</sup> William Blattner, "Authenticity and Resoluteness," in *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time*, Edited by Mark Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>113</sup> Iain Thomson, "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time*.

<sup>114</sup> See, for example, Kierkegaard's discussion of the philistine tax collector and the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*. Sheridan Hough discusses this example at length in *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). One could also choose nearly any of the individuals I discuss below from *Concept of Anxiety*.

conformism and a refusal to take responsibility for one's life. Second, and relatedly, if *das Man* is an existential structure, shaping the options available in a society, then *das Man* must be more sensitive to some of the subtleties of a situation than sometimes assumed. Part of the problem here is that Heidegger himself says that publicness "is insensitive to every difference of level and of genuineness and never gets to the heart of the matter."<sup>115</sup> But if authenticity is a way of taking up the existential structure of *das Man* and not a way of opting out of it, then painting authenticity as expertise in a particular activity that allows one to transcend *das Man* is less promising.<sup>116</sup> Instead, the phronesis of authenticity is of a higher order, depending on how the individual relates to the options available in a society.

In Section II, I discuss Kierkegaard's conception of what is required for an agent to become an individual primarily by examining his discussion in *Concept of Anxiety* of how agents can fall short of rich individuality. Each of these individuals lack the inwardness required for robust individuality. For Kierkegaard, the individual who succeeds at becoming human is one who takes responsibility for the uniquely situated self she is, while appreciating her agential efficacy and her responsibility/guilt for the life that she has come to live and for what she does. In Section III, I examine Heidegger's conception of authenticity, particularly emphasizing the relationship between *das Man* as an existential structure and *das Man* as a problematic way of failing to live one's own life. For Heidegger, *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity) is in large part a way of explaining how our lives can be genuinely ours when so much of who

---

<sup>115</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 127.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, *Sein und Zeit*, 130.



we are is, to borrow Loren Lomasky's phrase, "ingested with one's mother's milk."<sup>117</sup> One of Kierkegaard's major worries is that we could go through our lives lacking the inwardness or the passion fitting to a rich human existence. Even the person who accomplishes great things could in important ways be living a hollow existence. Heidegger, on the other hand, senses a tension between two factors: (1) the rampant ways in which our who we are is not up to us—whether the result of genetics, physical environment, linguistic and social conventions, just to name a few; (2) the fact that, as humans, we care deeply about how we live and who we are. His notion of authenticity is an attempt to explain how we can live lives that are deeply our own given these constraints.

With a clearer conception of Kierkegaard and Heidegger in hand, in Section IV, we return to the question of the value of authenticity in light of our discussions of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Is there something worthwhile that lies behind our unreflective endorsement of living authentically and disparagement of living inauthentic lives? I will argue that, *inter alia*, taking ownership in the sense required for authenticity opens the door for individuals to guide their lives in a non-trivial way, to see their role in their actions and, consequently, increases their ability to re-orient their lives when necessary instead of merely conforming to custom, or habit, or social pressures. As I hope to make clear, authenticity need not always require a drastic renovation of one's life. It does, however, require one to take a certain orientation towards the stuff that makes up a life.

## **II. Kierkegaard on Becoming (and Failing to Become) a Self**

Kierkegaard thinks human existence involves various syntheses—including the physical and the psychological, and the temporal and the eternal—and sees becoming an individual as the

---

<sup>117</sup> Lomasky. *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community*, 47.

process of integrating these different factors. Merely integrating the factors is not enough, however. The agent's relationship to the integration also matters. Becoming an individual in the full sense involves not only a good integration of the factors, but also the right relationship toward that integration. Specifically, Kierkegaard thinks robust individuality requires the agent to take responsibility for her self and her actions in three ways. First, the Kierkegaardian individual recognizes and takes responsibility for her role in the self that she is. Second, the individual takes responsibility for her actions in the world. And, third, the individual takes responsibility for the standards that she allows to guide her life. In order to show what it looks like to succeed at becoming an individual, we start by looking at three agents who each fall short on a different prong of Kierkegaardian individuality.<sup>118</sup>

Kierkegaard describes the process through which we become individuals as a qualitative leap.<sup>119</sup> We take the qualitative leap as we synthesize the psychical and the physical.<sup>120</sup> Spirit is the combining function of these two dimensions. Further, in the relation between the psychical and the physical, spirit is relating itself to itself. That is, through the way she combines the physical and the psychical, the individual relates to herself. Because there are different ways to combine the psyche and body, spirit expresses itself as anxiety. Anxiety, here, is not merely psychological distress without a clear object; instead, anxiety is

---

<sup>118</sup> Kierkegaard's view of selfhood involves two different standards. In modernity, Kierkegaard thinks we cannot help but be in the "self-game." We are aware there are other ways of being and different ways of putting together the psychical and the physical. In this sense, we can't help but be a self. But there is another sense of self that involves something more and at which we are prone to failure.

<sup>119</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, Trans. Reidar Thomte (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 79.

<sup>120</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 43, 48, 90.

how freedom's possibility is announced.<sup>121</sup> Kierkegaard describes the freedom to work out how to live, to live out the synthesis of psyche and body, as the “anxious possibility of being able.”<sup>122</sup> Anxiety—which is accompanied by the awareness that there is not one right way to live, that there are different ways of working out the relation between the psychical and the physical—can be both exhilarating and disorienting.<sup>123</sup> Kierkegaard describes it as “the dizziness of freedom.”<sup>124</sup>

We have various possibilities—different ways of synthesizing the psyche and body—and we are free. It is up to us to decide how to live and there is nothing telling us definitively how to work out this synthesis.<sup>125</sup> In the analytic tradition, Joseph Raz, T.M. Scanlon, Michael Bratman, and Jeffrey Seidman believe the contours of our lives are underdetermined by our judgments about value.<sup>126</sup> There is too much value in the world for us to engage with all of it. So as we piece together our lives, decisions about priorities and commitments are underdetermined by the value of things and activities. Our awareness of possibilities combined with our freedom and the fact that there is no one “right way” for how to live

---

<sup>121</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 74, 91-92.

<sup>122</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 44.

<sup>123</sup> A more orthodox Kierkegaardian view is that there is a right way to live—the Christian life. But even if this is right, there are a variety of ways that one could live a Christian life.

<sup>124</sup> Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 61.

<sup>125</sup> See “nothing” on 76-77 of *Concept of Anxiety*.

<sup>126</sup> Joseph Raz, Chapter 14 in *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); T.M. Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other*, 119, for example; Michael Bratman in “Autonomy and Hierarchy” in *Structures of Agency*; and Jeffrey Seidman in “Valuing and Caring.”

beget anxiety. Anxiety, or “entangled freedom,”<sup>127</sup> stands between possibility and actuality. It captures both the freedom—we work out possibilities of how to live—and the necessity—there are limits to how we can live in the world—involved in human agency. By working through the entangled freedom of anxiety—living in certain ways and not others, committing ourselves to some projects at the expense of others—we leap from possibility to actuality. And in this leap, sin is posited and the person becomes an individual.<sup>128</sup>

The term “leap” emphasizes that how we live—which possibilities we take up and how we do so—is underdetermined by the reasons we have. Each individual must leap, going beyond judgments of value and intersubjective worth to find her own way to bring together the psychical and the physical. Kierkegaard thus thinks every individual begins anew and innocence (the state of possibility) “is always only lost by the qualitative leap of the individual,” which he describes as sin.<sup>129</sup> It could seem circular to claim that innocence is lost through the individual’s qualitative leap but that one only becomes an individual by taking the leap. And there is a circle of sorts. Individuality is only achieved by positing a self. The pre-individual realizes her freedom and posits the individual she will become, and in so doing she becomes or starts to become that individual. Kierkegaardian sin, by which one

---

<sup>127</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 49.

<sup>128</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 54, 79.

<sup>129</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 34, 37, 79. Kierkegaard thinks sin is essential to becoming an individual. Sin, however, is not merely a violation of certain proscriptions. Adam’s first sin is not to be understood primarily as the numeric first in a series of subsequent sins. Instead, first sin “constitutes the nature of the quality” (30): “Through the first sin, sin came into the world. [But] precisely in the same way it is true of every subsequent man’s first sin, that through it sin comes into the world” (31). The single quality involved in both Adam’s sin and each individual’s sin is “individuality,” and Kierkegaard thinks “not everyone wants to have” individuality (232).

becomes a self, is self-assertion in a double sense. By asserting oneself—taking the leap by living and working out the synthesis of psyche and body in the face of dizzying freedom and the awareness that there is no right way to do the synthesis—one asserts, or becomes, a self. Each individual (after Adam) must take the same qualitative leap: “Every individual becomes guilty only through himself.”<sup>130</sup>

But we do not create ourselves *ex nihilo*. Every individual begins in a “historical nexus” that shapes the options available to her.<sup>131</sup> Agents make their own leaps to individuality while situated in a particular historical environment in the same way that the artist’s originality happens within an artistic tradition (and is not the result of radically new creation in a vacuum).<sup>132</sup> What is crucial for Kierkegaard is not that something entirely new be created but that the individuals take the right sort of relationship to their lives. As will become clear, the not-quite-individuals we will discuss fall short in the relationship they take toward their lives, not for lack of original content.

Not everyone wants to have individuality (or the responsibility associated with it) and in Chapter Three of *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard discusses three ways one can fail in the task of selfhood. In each case, the agent fails to realize her own role in becoming an individual or, put differently, in sin. In *spiritlessness*, the agent fails to realize her role in putting

---

<sup>130</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 53.

<sup>131</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 73.

<sup>132</sup> Even poetic originality depends on a tradition. As T.S. Eliot puts it, “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.” Thus poetic genius is not a matter of creating something out of nothing but of absorbing and then improving or redirecting the tradition. “Philip Massinger,” *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methune, 1920), 125.

together the self; in *fate*, the agent fails to realize her agential efficacy, underappreciating how she makes a difference in the world; in, *guilt*, the agent fails to realize that external standards cannot justify her actions, thinking instead that deferring to some standard will justify her as an agent. As we get a better sense for how Kierkegaard thinks agents can fail to become individuals, his conception of robust agency will become clearer. We will also see how, although tied up with his religious project, Kierkegaard's ideal of selfhood is not only at home with but shapes existential thought about living a rich human life.

### **II.a. Spiritlessness**

In the opening scenes of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Stepan Arkadyich and Alexei glide through the upper echelons of Russian society, navigating with ease the social norms and societal expectations of individuals in their positions. But their social ease is a bit artificial. Kitty Scherbatsky's father lumps Vronsky together with the fops of St. Petersburg who are "made by machine" and "all the same sort."<sup>133</sup> Vronsky successfully if insincerely woos Kitty by saying "to her the things that are usually said in society," even though he has no intention to propose marriage. Earlier Stepan Arkadyich, Kitty's brother-in-law and Anna's brother, is described in the following way:

"Though neither science, nor art, nor politics itself interested him, he firmly held the same views on all these subjects as the majority and his newspaper did, and changed them only when the majority did, or, rather, he did not change them, but they themselves changed imperceptibly in him."<sup>134</sup>

As Tolstoy portrays them, Stepan Arkadyich and Vronsky lack something. Their views and behaviors are dictated by the majority, by what is in fashion, and/or by what is expected of

---

<sup>133</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 55.

<sup>134</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 7.

individuals in their circles. This gives them a certain success in society, but it can come at a cost. When one's tastes, actions, and views are not only shaped by but are identical to what would be expected of an individual in a given situation, we wonder if they really belong to that individual. And this, presumably, is what Kitty's father dislikes about Vronsky. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian aristocratic circles, there were certain approved courtship procedures, and the prince doesn't seem to object to those. The problem is that Vronsky is merely going through those procedures, merely conforming with the expected norms of society, but his heart is not in it. He flatters the young, beautiful princess as a charming and eligible bachelor would, causing Kitty to turn down Levin's earnest (if awkward) marriage proposal. But Vronsky successfully woos Kitty without having intentions of proposing marriage. He is going through the motions of courtship without being committed to their (typical) outcome.

When individuals act in mechanical, customary ways without taking responsibility for their actions, Kierkegaard describes it as spiritlessness. The spiritless agent, on Kierkegaard's account, goes through the motions but hides from the fact that he is responsible for what he does. Kierkegaard describes spiritlessness as "Christian paganism." Mere paganism, he thinks, is absence of spirit; but Christian paganism is spiritlessness. But why "Christian" paganism? It is the convergence of two factors that makes spiritlessness uniquely possible for the *Christian* in the *modern* age. Christian paganism is distinct from mere paganism because, Kierkegaard thinks, the Christian has been shown by Christ the right way to live. But in the modern age, one cannot help but see that there are various, justifiable ways to live

a life and this inevitably affects how we approach our own lives. Charles Taylor discusses this shift in the following way:<sup>135</sup>

“There has been a titanic shift in our western civilization. We have changed not just from a condition where most people lived ‘naively’ in a construal [of the moral/spiritual] as simple reality, to one in which almost no one is capable of this, but all see their option as one among many. We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an ‘engaged’ one in which we live as best we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a ‘disengaged’ one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist.”<sup>136</sup>

No longer able to live “naively” in the life into which he was born because aware that the Christian life is only one among many paths, the Christian pagan is in the game of selfhood. The multiplicity of apparently justifiable options places the responsibility on the individual to choose a life instead of simply living the life of one’s antecedents. This possibility can be at once exhilarating and terrifying. And rather than wholeheartedly setting out on this agential adventure, the spiritless agent falls short because he flees from this responsibility. Kierkegaard says that spiritlessness is thus “neither guilty nor not guilty.”<sup>137</sup> The Christian pagan fails to become guilty in the way required to be an individual, because he hides from the fact that he is (at least potentially) spirit. That is, he realizes that he is responsible for the way the psychical and the physical are synthesized and hides from that realization.<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> “We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith [or our life generally] also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.” Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>136</sup> Taylor, *Secular Age*, 12.

<sup>137</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 94.

<sup>138</sup> This awareness distinguishes him from Kierkegaard’s pagan who is unaware of this



Spiritlessness “is viewed as sin from the standpoint of spirit, because this existence falls short of sin. It doesn’t posit the self through the synthesis of the psychical and the physical. This is why . . . one can demand spirit of it.”<sup>139</sup> Sin here functions in two different ways:

- When spiritlessness is “viewed as sin from the standpoint of spirit,” “sin” is used in the more traditional sense of falling short of some standard, specifically here, the standard of individuality.
- But when this spiritless existence “falls short of sin,” “sin” refers to the self-assertion through which one becomes a self.

Thus, one fails to become an individual—sinning in relation to the demands of spirit—when one fails to sin by not asserting oneself as a self. So what does exactly does spiritlessness look like?

Kierkegaard thinks it can be hard to pick out the spiritless individual. Admittedly, some artists and writers make it easy to spot spiritless characters, portraying them comically. When this happens, the spiritless characters recite nonsense, clichés, and go through the motions. But Kierkegaard thinks that this way of representing spiritlessness results from insecurity on the part of the artist (but also probably picking up on our own agential insecurities). For Kierkegaard, the words of the spiritless individual can be indistinguishable from the richest individual. As he puts it:

“When spiritless is to be represented [aesthetically], mere twaddle is simply put into the mouth of the actor, because no one has the courage to put into the mouth of spiritlessness the same words one uses oneself. This is insecurity. Spiritlessness can say exactly the same thing that the richest spirit has said, but it does not say it by virtue of spirit. Man qualified as spiritless

---

responsibility.

<sup>139</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 94.

has become a talking machine, and there is nothing to prevent him from repeating by rote a philosophical rigamarole, a confession of faith, or a political recitative.”<sup>140</sup>

One can go through the motions, knowing what should be said or done in a particular situation without doing it sincerely, genuinely, or for the right reasons. This sort of behavior can appear mechanical or insincere, potentially harming one’s standing with others. But even if an external observer cannot pick out the spiritless confession of love or faith, Kierkegaard thinks something crucial is still off. By missing or ignoring that he is spirit, the agent’s actions lack vitality, even if an observer (third- or, potentially, first-personal) cannot distinguish them from spirit-backed actions. One could argue that key aspects of Tolstoy’s portrayals of Vronsky and Stepan Arkadyich throughout the novel are guilty of “insecurity,” in Kierkegaard’s sense. Of course their respective struggles in the novel are not solely due to their spiritlessness. But, for Kierkegaard, the really unsettling thing about spiritlessness is that it says and does “exactly the same thing that the richest spirit” does.

Actions involve more than bodily movement. And there is more to becoming an individual than performing certain actions. In robust agency, the agent recognizes her responsibility in creating her self and for her actions in the world. Rather than running from the fact that one is responsible for one’s life and that there are many ways to live a life, the individual embraces that freedom and responsibility.

The *spiritless* agent does and says what is expected of her in a given situation, but she is not fully behind her actions and they do not express where she stands. If her actions do line up with what matters to her, this is a matter of luck. Because she has not taken responsibility for herself, for her synthesis of the psychical and the physical, the shape of her

---

<sup>140</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 95.

life and her actions will quickly be co-opted by whatever is convenient or influential. Instead of her words and actions coming from her as a result of the particular life she has brought about, the spiritless agent will do and say what is expected but without identifying with that life or seeing her role in bringing it about. The spiritless individual is autonomous while still falling short of that something more/different that Kierkegaard has in mind.

There is a real allure to the spiritless existence, though. The pursuit of “the highest life”—at one point Kierkegaard calls it a “spiritual trial”—is difficult, and the easiest way to escape the trail is to become spiritless.<sup>141</sup> Kierkegaard jabs, by becoming “like most people” in seeking and heeding the advice of the common consensus (“Tom, Dick, and Harry,” as the translators name them), the road to perfection that was once “narrow and solitary” and filled with difficulties now can be made “by railway and in good company,” and one arrives before he knows it.<sup>142</sup> But one need only look at the titles to Kierkegaard’s works—*Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *The Sickness unto Death* [despair]—to see that he does not think an easy journey is the way to “the highest life.”

## **II.b. Fate**

Most agree that Michael Jordan is one of the best basketball players of all time. But probably not all are aware of what could be the real cause for his success. Yes, he was talented, had exceptional work ethic, and was a fierce competitor. But there might be another, literally hidden, cause for his on-court achievements: his University of North Carolina basketball shorts which he wore under his Chicago Bulls uniform throughout his career. In baseball, Wade Boggs, winner of five MLB batting titles, was famous for his extensive game-day

---

<sup>141</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 117.

<sup>142</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 117.

routine based around superstitions. He ate chicken before every game, took his batting practice at 5:17 pm, and ran wind sprints at 7:17 pm, just to name a few examples.<sup>143</sup> Boggs explains, “Almost every hitter has a routine as he gets into the box. Pete Rose. George Foster. Carlton Fisk. Yas. Mine has evolved from Little League on through the minors, part by design, part born of superstition, but mine’s the same as theirs—only it takes a little more than 5 ½ hours.”<sup>144</sup> A recent study suggests that superstitions can improve performance.<sup>145</sup> When the individual believes that something will help improve performance, wearing the particular article of clothing or performing the pre-game routine can positively affect the outcome. By giving the individual added confidence in her ability or helping her relax or focus, superstitious beliefs can be beneficial. But whether or not they help improve performance, there is a potential worry about how superstitions (and similar phenomena) affect our agency.

In “Superstition,” Stevie Wonder warns, “When you believe in things that you don't understand / Then you suffer / Superstition ain't the way.” In *Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard uses belief in an oracle or omen to show the second way agents can fall short of individuality. Oracles and omens are by their very nature ambiguous. This ambiguity makes it impossible to understand their pronouncements. So when you base your actions on those omens—and especially, when you believe that it is the omen/oracle that determines the

---

<sup>143</sup> Stuart Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-4; “Batting Champ Wade Boggs Hits with a Cool Eye, a Hot Hand and a Resolve to Help His Sister Overcome Illness,” *People* 25(24), June 16, 1986.

<sup>144</sup> Peter Gammons, “Pretty Fair for a Fowl Guy,” *Sports Illustrated* 64(15), April 14, 1984, 46.

<sup>145</sup> Lysann Damisch, Barbara Stoberock, and Thomas Mussweiler, “Keep Your Fingers Crossed! How Superstition Improves Performance,” *Psychological Science* 21(7): 1014–1020.

outcome and not your own agency—your agency will suffer. To paraphrase Stevie Wonder, it isn't the way to individuality.

When agents experience anxiety as fate, they fail to realize their efficacy as agents. Or more precisely, they hide from their agential efficacy, from the fact that they make a difference in the world's outcome. Kierkegaard defines fate as the unity of necessity and the accidental. The oracle has the unique responsibility of explaining fate, but since fate is both necessary and accidental, the oracle's prediction must be ambiguous.<sup>146</sup> This ambiguity, however, allows the agent to interpret the oracle's saying in different ways. And even though there is not adequate support for any single correct interpretation, the agent still acts on her interpretation of the oracle's saying (though she fails to see it as *her interpretation* of an ambiguous pronouncement). Thinking that the oracle's pronouncement is definitive, the agent acts based on how she understands the oracle's pronouncement and passes responsibility for what she does and who she becomes to the deity (or to the oracle who speaks for the deity).

Although typical of paganism, Kierkegaard thinks fate takes a different shape in Christianity. "Within Christianity," Kierkegaard writes, "the anxiety of paganism in relation to sin is found wherever spirit is indeed present but is not essentially posited as spirit. The phenomenon appears most clearly in a genius."<sup>147</sup> Kierkegaard draws on Hegel's conception of genius, which Hegel explains in the following way:

"By genius, we are to understand the particular nature of a man which, in every situation and circumstance, decides his action and destiny. I am in fact

---

<sup>146</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 96-97.

<sup>147</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 98.

a duality: on the one hand, what I know myself to be according to my outward life and general ideas, and on the other hand, what I am in my inner life which is determined in a particular manner. This particular nature of my inwardness constitutes my destiny: for it [the nature of my inwardness] is the oracle on whose pronouncement depends every resolve of the individual; it forms the objective element which asserts itself from out of the individual's character."<sup>148</sup>

Because the genius is effective as an agent—he is able to bring about the actions and results he decides—the role of fate in his failing to become an individual is especially clear. Since his inner nature determines what he brings about in the world, the genius who relates to himself in terms of fate stands out: “he will accomplish astonishing things; nevertheless, he will always succumb to fate.”<sup>149</sup> He “is dependent on an insignificance that no one comprehends, but upon which [he] grants omnipotent significance.”<sup>150</sup> Kierkegaard describes Napoleon waiting for a particular day to attack or longing for the sun of Austerlitz, the day on which he defeated the Austrian and Russian armies.<sup>151</sup>

We can imagine a modern-day Napoleon as a great athlete who wears the same (unwashed) jersey to keep a win streak alive, attributing his success to the foul-smelling jersey and not to his own athletic ability. When the streak ends after someone mistakenly washes the jersey, the superstitious athlete blames the jersey (or its washer) for the loss—with its newly washed state acting as an oracle portending defeat.<sup>152</sup> There is a sense in which

---

<sup>148</sup> See Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 246-247, note 42. Quoting from Hegel, *Encyclopädie*, Part Three, *Philosophie des Geistes*, §405.

<sup>149</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 99.

<sup>150</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 99.

<sup>151</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 99.

<sup>152</sup> Boggs's game-day routine developed in this way, slowly adding “things to do” and “things

the washed jersey led to the loss, but only because the individual took the omen as determinative of the future and then acted accordingly, when in fact, as a genius, victory or defeat was still up to him. The agent does not see that the oracle's prophecy is self-fulfilling and that he is the agent of its fulfillment.

Because "everything depends upon how he himself understands it [the outward] in the presence of his secret friend (fate)," outward signs are reliable indicators of future events, but only because the fated genius misses or ignores the fact that it is how he interprets the oracle's pronouncement—not the oracle itself—that determines his actions and their consequences.<sup>153</sup> The mere (fate-oriented) genius depends on the oracle for the pronouncement of fate, so he fails to realize he is the source of his actions and that he impacts the world in the ways he determines.<sup>154</sup> This failure amounts to his failure to become an individual. The genius is great. And because he conquers or falls by himself, Kierkegaard thinks he is even greater when he falls.<sup>155</sup> In defeat, in this case unbeknownst to himself, he is clearly the source of his own defeat.<sup>156</sup> The mere genius fails to recognize his hand in the

---

to avoid" leading up to the game.

<sup>153</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 100.

<sup>154</sup> Kierkegaard distinguishes between the mere genius and the genius who is religious. It is the mere genius who is the focus of the fate section. Toward the end of the fate section and beyond, Kierkegaard considers what happens as the genius turns inward (toward himself) and upward (toward God).

<sup>155</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 100.

<sup>156</sup> "If the genius remains thus immediately determined and turned outward, he will indeed become great and his accomplishment astounding, but he will never come to himself and never become great to himself. All his activity is turned outward, and if I may so speak, the planetarian core that radiates everything never comes into existence . . . The genius does not become significant to himself." Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 101.

events of the world, even when those events are a result of (even identical with) his actions. Instead, those who succumb to fate attribute the course of their lives entirely to some oracle—whether human, meteorological, or one of apparel.

The *fate-oriented* agent's actions do come from himself: he is the source of his actions. But he is unaware of (or ignores) the degree to which he directs the course of his actions, attributing it instead to an omen or statement from the oracle. At first glance, it could seem that the fated individual falls prey to the same luck worry as the spiritless individual (that his actions align with what he cares about seems to be a matter of luck). But there is a significant twist that changes the worry. The genius has more of a self than the spiritless individual and so the idea of being true to oneself makes more sense. But because he hides from the fact that he is the source of his actions, relying instead on some other indicator to determine the course of his actions, even if he is true (or false) to himself, he would see the fortuitous alignment as a matter of fate (or luck!) and not as the result of his own agential achievement. But in terms of taking responsibility for oneself, the fate-focused individual places the responsibility for events on outward indicators—whether the sunrise or an unwashed jersey—and not on himself.

When we say that something “wasn't in the cards,” that can be fate-talk. That is not to say we have complete control over the outcomes in the world. But something “not being in the cards” can also be an agential excuse, a way to hide from one's part in the outcome. Sometimes a given outcome is “not in the cards” because we have hidden from our role in the world's events and, as a result, failed to act in a way that would have made it be in the cards. For Kierkegaard, however, excusing one's role in the outcome can happen even when the desired outcome obtains. This isn't a matter of agential grandeur and credit-seeking,



however. By properly and accurately acknowledging one's role in an event, one can better acknowledge the ways in which others and the world worked together for or against a particular outcome. It thus allows for a sort of agential humility and gratitude rather than the fatalistic perspective taken by the fated individuals, however effective they are as agents.

“When you believe in things that you don't understand,” Wonder claims, “then you suffer.” Agentially speaking, we suffer because there is some sense in which we are the source of our actions unawares. In attributing the outcomes to other sources, we can undermine our ability to direct the course of events. We may want things to go a certain way. And that way could be well within reach. But if we suffer the problem of the fate-oriented agent, we could fail to reach our goal simply because the sun doesn't rise a certain way or because our lucky socks are accidentally washed. It isn't the sun or the socks that bear responsibility for our failure, however. We are the ones acting. But we have made ourselves something like agential henchmen, doing the bidding of meaningless oracles and omens. By believing in things that we don't (because can't) understand, our agency suffers. We fail to appreciate the way in which we can influence the world.

### **II.c. Guilt**

When Jill decides to run a marathon in the fall, she looks up a marathon training program on the *Runner's World* website. She carefully enters in her current weekly mileage and her goal time and the website comes up with a tailored program to help her reach her goal of 4-hours for the marathon. Starting at “Week One,” she diligently completes the assigned workouts at the recommended paces and progresses through the 16-week program. Although she is frequently tired and feels sluggish during many workouts, she is confident that the training program is good and will help her reach her goal. She anticipates the successful (and fast)

completion of her first marathon. Because she has faithfully followed the program designed to help her run a 4-hour marathon, she is sure that her training is adequate. On race day, however, she finds that she falls short of her goal. Disappointed, she concludes that the program was faulty, forgetting or choosing to ignore the earlier signs of overtraining. She then seeks out a different, better program that she can follow to become a 4-hour marathoner. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, the problem isn't finding or trying to follow a training plan. The problem is that Jill believes and acts as if following the training plan (come what may) is what makes her a 4-hour marathoner.

The third potential-individual, who experiences anxiety as guilt, fails to realize that external standards cannot justify her as a self. Instead, she lives as though complying with some external standard—something analogous to the marathon training plan—can justify her as an agent. Remember the fact of underdetermination in deciding a life path. When this individual faces her possibilities, instead of acknowledging the under-determination and owning up to one's responsibility in deciding which path to pursue, she defers the responsibility for how to live to some external standard. Kierkegaard thinks sacrifice in Judaism corresponds to the oracle in paganism, in the sense that both sacrifice and the oracle keep the agent from taking responsibility for her actions and making her life her own.<sup>157</sup> Instead of sinning (understood as self-assertion) and becoming guilty, repeated sacrifice allows the potential self to avoid real guilt. But by repeating the sacrifice, guilt and sin—and with those, robust individuality—are continually deferred.

---

<sup>157</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 104. The editors of *Concept of Anxiety* note: "The repetition of the sacrifice in the Old Testament becomes for Kierkegaard an indication of its imperfection, as well as an indication that the "actual relation of sin is not posited." Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 257, note 50.

The problem with the agent who experiences anxiety as guilt is that she does not really become guilty: “as soon as guilt is posited, anxiety is gone, and repentance is there.”<sup>158</sup> When the individual actually becomes guilty and takes responsibility for her actions, then she can move on from this kind of anxiety.<sup>159</sup> But the individual in anxiety is ambivalent about guilt—both drawn to and fearful of it: “Life offers sufficient phenomena in which the individual in anxiety gazes almost desirously at guilt and yet fears it . . . The truth in the Carpocracy view of attaining perfection through sin lies at this point. It has its truth in the moment of decision when the immediate spirit posits itself as spirit by spirit.”<sup>160</sup> Kierkegaard thinks the Carpocracy view that a person “must participate in all of human experience, even the worst and most condemnable, in order to attain perfection,” has something to it. The truth in the view that perfection involves participation in all of human experience is that it is the self-expression of sin that allows the person to become an individual.

But just as the oracle determines the actions of the fate-guided genius, for the person who experiences anxiety as guilt, the law determines her actions. The agent seeks ultimate justification for her life by acting in accordance with the law, thinking this will allow her to avoid or be absolved of guilt. But whether written on stone tablets or found in popular moral opinion, these external standards problematically defer the responsibility for one’s life

---

<sup>158</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 103.

<sup>159</sup> Here Kierkegaard says that anxiety is gone, but there are other places where anxiety continues, only in a different role. For example: “Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate,” Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 155; *SV IV* 421; “Whoever is educated [by possibility] remains with anxiety . . . For him, anxiety becomes a serving spirit that against its will leads him where he wishes to go,” Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 159; *SV IV* 424.

<sup>160</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 103.

and actions. And Kierkegaard thinks this is in large part what keeps these agents from becoming more robust individuals. Instead of owning up to the fact that they are responsible for their actions and for who they are, they seek justification for what is ultimately unjustified by conforming to the law. The *guilt-oriented* individual struggles in the quest for robust selfhood precisely because robust selfhood is the very thing that he is avoiding. Instead of taking responsibility for his actions and for the self that he has become, he seeks justification in some external standard. But because no such standard can ultimately justify the life one chooses to live, any such attempt will ultimately be unsuccessful.

#### **II.d. The Religious Genius and Kierkegaardian Individuality**

Turning from these individuals that Kierkegaard thinks fall short of robust selfhood, let's look briefly at the religious genius (the genius who is religious) and see what sets him apart. Earlier in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard suggests that it is through salvation that the agent can become a richer individual: "When salvation is posited, anxiety, together with possibility, is left behind."<sup>161</sup> Setting aside for now the question of what he means for possibility to be left behind, this passage suggests that anxiety is something that would be left behind. Given his recent discussion of the problematic ways in which anxiety can be experienced, this may not seem like a bad idea. But remember that anxiety, for Kierkegaard, is connected to freedom in ways that do not seem clearly problematic. For example:

- "Anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility."<sup>162</sup>

---

<sup>161</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 53.

<sup>162</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 42.

- “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis.”<sup>163</sup>
- “Anxiety . . . is an expression of the perfection of human nature.”<sup>164</sup>

Anxiety is an important part of what it is to be human and is, in part, what allows us to become individuals. For Kierkegaard, then, leaving anxiety behind “does not mean that anxiety is annihilated, but that when rightly used it plays another role.”<sup>165</sup> So how does one escape or avoid the problematic experience of anxiety and become a robust individual?

Kierkegaard explains the first step in the following way:

“the first thing he does is to turn toward himself. In turning toward himself, he *eo ipso* turns toward God . . . As he turns toward himself, he discovers guilt . . . [But] in turning inward he [also] discovers freedom.”<sup>166</sup>

The inwardness described here is not mere inner reflection, and the guilt it brings about is not one of some misdeed. Instead, the guilt is a certain awareness of oneself as an agent and of one’s responsibility for the synthesis of the physical and the psychical, for how one chooses to live in light of one’s historical situation and the dizzying freedom of anxiety.<sup>167</sup>

And the freedom Kierkegaard had in mind is not “freedom to do this or that in the world, to become king and emperor or an abusive street corner orator, but freedom to know of

---

<sup>163</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 62.

<sup>164</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 72.

<sup>165</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 53.

<sup>166</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 107-108.

<sup>167</sup> Just as the “greatest” moment of the immediate genius was when he collapses for himself by fate, the greatest moment of the genius who is religious is “when he sinks before himself in the depth of sin-consciousness.” Sin-consciousness, then, is something like an awareness of one’s existential and agential responsibility. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 110.

himself that he is freedom.”<sup>168</sup> It is not, then, freedom to do anything but instead the freedom of knowing that he guides his life. For Kierkegaard, turning inward and realizing that one is free is necessary but not sufficient. It is through sin that one asserts a self, but this turn inward opens the door for a turn upward. It is through the inward and upward combination that one becomes an individual and not merely another number in the species.<sup>169</sup> The gift of the genius who is religious is a gift of “willing” (of desiring and directing one’s activity).

It is inwardness, or earnestness, that distinguishes Kierkegaard’s ideal agent from the spiritless and from those who experience anxiety merely as fate or guilt. He describes the “pious” person who lacks inwardness in the following way: “one may hear such a pious person beating time as it were, exactly like one who cannot dance but nevertheless knows enough to beat time, although he is never fortunate to get in step.”<sup>170</sup> This person knows it all: “He genuflects before the holy . . . He talks of meeting before the throne of God and knows how many times one should bow . . . He knows everything, like the man who can prove a mathematical proposition when the letters are ABC but not DEF.”<sup>171</sup> Even though

---

<sup>168</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 108.

<sup>169</sup> Charles Taylor’s interpretation of Augustine in *Sources of the Self* suggests a parallel between Kierkegaard’s conception of sin and Augustine’s conception of inwardness. Both inwardness (Augustine) and sin (Kierkegaard) can be the cause of evil but also offer the potential for a better, richer existence. Just as sin opens the door for one to become an individual, for Augustine, the turn inward allows agents to see that they already are and, to flourish, must continue to be dependent on a being beyond themselves. It is through this acknowledgement that one can receive the grace of God that can heal the will (for Augustine). See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 138-139.

<sup>170</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 141.

<sup>171</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 139-140.

the “pious” person in some sense knows what the highest life amounts to, these passages show that not only is his knowledge limited and inflexible, but it also doesn’t quite get the rhythm right. Whether or not his knowledge is actually as thorough as he might think, he certainly lacks the know-how that is central for Kierkegaard. Inwardness, as Kierkegaard conceives it, is understanding, even a self-understanding or self-consciousness. “This self-consciousness,” however, “is not contemplation,” but instead “is action.”<sup>172</sup> For Kierkegaard, though, it is the manner not the content of the action that is key.<sup>173</sup>

His emphasis of the manner over the content explains why, with proper inwardness, or earnestness, an individual “is capable of returning regularly every Sunday with the same originality to the same thing” over and over again.<sup>174</sup> That is, even though our lives will be filled with the stuff of day-to-day lives, we can take up the quotidian in different ways. One possibility is that, over time, these daily activities can become mere habits. When this happens, Kierkegaard thinks, our effectiveness ebbs and flows. But the other possibility is that, through earnestness, we can repeat the same activities without them becoming stale or mechanical reproductions of previously meaningful events. The content/manner distinction can be pushed too far. As we change our orientation toward our lives, some content may fall out. And some of what remains could be transformed. We could still concern ourselves with some of the same projects, for example, but see our relationship to relevant demands

---

<sup>172</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 143.

<sup>173</sup> See, for example, his discussion of certitude in *Concept of Anxiety*, 139-140. His analysis of the philistine bourgeois tax collector in *Fear and Trembling* also supports this interpretation.

<sup>174</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 149.

differently.<sup>175</sup> Even if I continue as a teacher or father, engaging in many of the same activities as before, but the way I engage in those activities is transformed. Depending on how we distinguish between manner and content, from a first personal, agential perspective, it may not be something we can clearly distinguish. What I do when I grade papers or when I coach my son's basketball team is tied up with the way in which I relate to those activities. So even if the way I grade and the coach is indistinguishable to an external observer—in which case the content could remain the same while allowing for the possibility of a transformed manner—things can appear very differently from the agential perspective.

Anxiety is crucial in order to have meaningful “repetition” and not mere “habit.” This is way Kierkegaard says, “Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate.”<sup>176</sup> When anxiety becomes educative, it can help us learn to get the “how” right; it is by learning from anxiety in the right way that one can learn how to bring together the temporal and eternal aspects of human existence in the right way. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly sketch how Kierkegaard thinks the proper experience of anxiety allows us to “get it right.”

Remember that anxiety is “freedom’s possibility,” so “whoever is educated by anxiety is educated by possibility, and only he who is educated by possibility is educated

---

<sup>175</sup> In *A Case for Irony*, Jonathan Lear uses the example of teaching. As the teacher takes the ironic stance toward his role as teacher, he finds that his practical knowledge about teaching is disrupted. He can still grasp the socially accepted pedagogical norms of pedagogy, but he might now ask, “What does any of that have to do with teaching?” Lear, *A Case for Irony*, 11, 16-22.

<sup>176</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 154.



according to his infinitude.”<sup>177</sup> So what exactly does this education by anxiety and possibility look like? And what does this have to do with infinitude? As human beings, we find ourselves with many possibilities, facing a variety of options. We make choices about careers, romantic partners, places to live, interests to pursue, and so forth. This seemingly limitless array of possibilities, however, is also constrained by our finitude. We find ourselves in specific places, tied to specific people, and with particular dispositions. That is not to say we cannot change where we live, whom we associate with, or what we like. But as finite creatures, there is only so much we can actually experience: “finiteness and the finite relations in which every individual is assigned a place, whether they be small, or everyday, or world-historical, educate only finitely.”<sup>178</sup> Kierkegaard thinks that we can go beyond this, being educated by possibility according to our infinitude: “in possibility all things are equally possible, and whoever has been brought up by possibility has grasped the terrible as well as the joyful.”<sup>179</sup>

Through the possibility of anxiety, the person can discover the infinitude of potential forms of life—with their joys but also their misfortunes—and can then return to his own situation, with something like appreciation, “not because he can escape the terrible things of life but because these always become weak by comparison with those of possibility.”<sup>180</sup> That is, as we consider all of the ways that our lives might have gone (or might still go), being educated by possibility, we can then in a sense return more freely, more of our own accord

---

<sup>177</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 155-156.

<sup>178</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 156.

<sup>179</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 156.

<sup>180</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 157.

to our own life. That can involve a reorientation to the habits, customs, and preferences that we have allowed to govern our lives. Traveling in a foreign city or country can have a similar effect. After seeing and, to some extent, immersing ourselves in a different way of life, we can sometimes return home aware that there are different ways to live and with a sense that we are, at least in part, responsible for living the way we do.

After this anxiety-guided education in possibility, the individual can better avoid the allures of spiritlessness, fate, and guilt, and can engage in his life in a fresh way. As Kierkegaard puts it, “whoever has truly learned how to be anxious will dance when the anxieties of finitude strike up the music and when the apprentices of finitude lose their minds and courage.”<sup>181</sup> It is something of an appreciation of our finitude combined with our capacity to grasp (near infinite) possibility that allows us to take responsibility for the uniquely situated self that we are, while also appreciating our agential efficacy and our responsibility for the lives that we come to live.

### **III. Heideggerian Authenticity and Selfhood**

It is generally agreed that Kierkegaard was a major influence for Heidegger (even if Heidegger notoriously underacknowledges the debt). Discussing Heidegger’s existential dimension—including his views on anxiety and authenticity—John Richardson notes that “Heidegger takes over many of these claims from Kierkegaard,”<sup>182</sup> a kinder characterization than Roger Poole’s claim that Heidegger “remorselessly ransacks Kierkegaard.”<sup>183</sup> But

---

<sup>181</sup> Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 161-162.

<sup>182</sup> John Richardson, *Heidegger* (New York: Routledge: 2012), 125.

<sup>183</sup> Richardson, *Heidegger*, 382. Roger Poole, “The Unknown Kierkegaard: Twentieth-Century Receptions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. A. Hannay and G.D. Marino

however one characterizes the relationship, the influence is obvious. In what follows, I present an account of Heidegger's concept of *Eigentlichkeit*. Although usually translated as "authenticity," the German *Eigentlich* suggests real/genuine but also, looking at the roots, ownership. The idea that we can take ownership for our lives or fail to do so is central to Heidegger's conception of authenticity.

Despite his protests to the contrary, it is hard not to think authenticity is preferable to inauthenticity. Part of this is a matter of word choice. As a default, something authentic seems better than something inauthentic. A museum curator, for example, would be devastated to find out a recent acquisition was inauthentic. To make matters worse, Heidegger chooses terms like "alienation," "falling" and "idle talk" and "fleeing" to describe inauthenticity. And even setting aside terminology, Heidegger's analyses of authenticity and inauthenticity support the idea that authenticity is privileged over inauthenticity. But while most interpreters agree Heidegger thinks authenticity is preferable to inauthenticity, there is disagreement about how authenticity is better than inauthenticity. Some, like Charles Taylor, think authenticity is a moral ideal; in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, he explains how authenticity is morally better than inauthenticity.<sup>184</sup> William Blattner discusses four approaches to understanding Heideggerian authenticity:

---

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 51-53.

<sup>184</sup> In it, he describes authenticity as "a powerful moral ideal," and a moral ideal is "a picture of what a better or higher mode of life would be, where 'better' and 'higher' are defined not in terms of what we happen to desire or need, but offer a standard of what we ought to desire" (15-16). Taylor traces the development through Socrates, Augustine, Rousseau, Kant, and the German Romantics. For many of these, authenticity was a matter of expressing one's true self. It is a further argument (and one for future work) that Heidegger's conception of authenticity is continuous with the expressivist notion of authenticity. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*.

(1) The Existentialist approach “understands authenticity as a form of life liberated from the illusions and distortions of everyday ‘idle talk’ and conformism”,<sup>185</sup>

(2) The Aristotelian approach “places authenticity in proximity to Aristotle’s notion of phronesis,” thinking authenticity “involves the capacity to see what a practical situation requires and to act on that insight”,<sup>186</sup>

(3) The Christian approach “focuses on the connections between the language of authenticity and Heidegger’s interpretation of Christian experience in Paul and Luther, as well as Kierkegaard’s existentialist appropriation thereof”,<sup>187</sup>

(4) The Transcendental approach “views authenticity, or at least conscience, [. . .] as a condition of the possibility of agency. Authentic Dasein is freed “from unquestioning subservience to anonymous public rules and constraints, freeing it to take responsibility for who it is and how it lives.”<sup>188</sup>

Blattner weaves the “insights of the existentialist, Aristotelian, and transcendental approaches to Heidegger’s conception into a single synthetic position.”<sup>189</sup> He leaves out “the Christian approach,” because he thinks it is not clear that “Kierkegaard’s religious thought is a key to unraveling Heidegger’s conception of authenticity.”<sup>190</sup>

But I think it is a mistake to downplay the role of Kierkegaard in understanding Heideggerian authenticity. Admittedly, it can be hard to classify Kierkegaard. Is he a Christian thinker? Is he an early existentialist? Both? Faith is central to Kierkegaard’s

---

<sup>185</sup> William Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time*, 321.

<sup>186</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 321.

<sup>187</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 321.

<sup>188</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 322.

<sup>189</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 322.

<sup>190</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 322.

conception of the good life. But someone (like Heidegger) could develop and expand key themes in Kierkegaard's work without agreeing that faith is central to rich human agency. Here I will not develop a complete account of Heidegger's conception of authenticity. But even my limited focus shows deep similarities between Heidegger's and Kierkegaard's accounts of excellent human agency. And that is even without exploring in depth the clearly Christian motif of falling or the discussions of guilt both Kierkegaard and Heidegger employ.<sup>191</sup>

Remember that, for Heidegger, *Eigentlichkeit* is an effort to explain how our lives can be ours when so much of human existence depends on our thrownness, our existential situatedness, which is in large part outside of our control. One threat to our ability to live our own lives is our tendency to problematically defer to what Heidegger calls *das Man*. For this reason my account of Heideggerian authenticity focuses on his treatment of *das Man* and his notion of anticipatory resoluteness. I focus on *das Man*—variously translated as “the one,” “the anyone,” or “the they”—because misunderstanding it leads to problematically individualistic versions of authenticity. Eliding the distinction between *das Man* as (a) existential structure and (b) agential scapegoat can lead one to think authenticity amounts to

---

<sup>191</sup> Of course, they talk about falling in very different ways. For Kierkegaard, the fall of Adam and Eve and, by extension, each subsequent agent is central to the possibility of the rich human life. Characteristically, Heidegger's approach to falling is ambivalent. On the one hand, he describes it as “existentially determinative for Being-in-the-world,” as “an essential ontological structure of Dasein itself.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 179. But he also identifies the essential characteristics of falling as “temptation, tranquillizing, alienation, and entanglement.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 180. This apparent ambivalence arises because falling and other terms can serve two different functions—one as an unavoidable, relatively benign existential structure and the other as a more serious agential threat, which potentially undermines the responsibility and sensitivity necessary for rich human agency.

non-conformism or rugged individualism.<sup>192</sup> Anticipatory resoluteness is central to what Heidegger thinks distinguishes an authentic life from an inauthentic life or, put differently, an owned life from a disowned life.<sup>193</sup> Harry Frankfurt famously distinguished between “movements of a person’s body that are mere happenings in his history, and those that are his own activities.”<sup>194</sup> Preliminary to our earlier discussion of autonomy, we discussed the literature that has developed trying to pinpoint what features distinguish actions from mere happenings. In a similar way but on a different level and/or with different worries, Heidegger’s account of anticipatory resoluteness identifies how one can make a life one’s own and not merely live the life one has inherited from others.

### **III.a. *das Man***

Heidegger uses *das Man* in two different ways. *Das Man* is an existential structure that unavoidably shapes the world we live in. But *das Man* can also be of a pernicious variety. It can be a way to avoid taking responsibility for one’s decisions, actions, and life generally. The goal in authenticity is not to break from *das Man* as existential structure—that isn’t possible—but to take over as one’s own—to take responsibility for—the life made possible by living with others. Because the intelligibility of our lives is tied up with *das Man* as an existential structure, breaking from *das Man* on this level is quixotic: “*das Man* itself

---

<sup>192</sup> “Rugged individualist” is Guignon’s phrase. Charles Guignon, “Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 215.

<sup>193</sup> Blattner suggests that Heidegger’s dichotomy between *eigentlich* and *uneigentlich* is better understood as three possibilities—unowned, disowned, and owned. Blattner, *Heidegger’s Being and Time* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 127-130.

<sup>194</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 59.

articulates the referential context of significance.”<sup>195</sup> The shape of our lives importantly depends on others: “the world is always the one that I share with others.”<sup>196</sup> The language(s) we learn, the families we are born into, and the religious and/or moral values we grow up with, just to name a few, are (at least initially) outside of our control. To communicate with others and for our actions to be intelligible, we need to learn how one speaks and acts. This type of *das Man* need not be pernicious. As Heidegger puts it, “Authentic being-one’s-self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from *das Man*; it is rather an existentiell modification of *das Man*—of *das Man* as an essential existentielle.”<sup>197</sup> Authenticity, then, does not require the individual to “detach” from *das Man*, to break from the life we have inherited and chart a new course. Instead, it involves taking over as one’s own the possibilities shaped by the existential structure *das Man*.<sup>198</sup>

For Heidegger, authenticity has less to do with the content of one’s life than with one’s relation to that life. Our lives are filled with possibilities—activities and pursuits—and we come into these in a number of ways: some we have chosen; some we have stumbled into; and some we have “grown up in . . . already.”<sup>199</sup> We become who we are by taking up

---

<sup>195</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 129. Unless otherwise noted, I use Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation, but I also indicate the pagination in the original German. One consistent exception to this is that I leave *das Man* untranslated instead of using their translation “the they.”

<sup>196</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 118.

<sup>197</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 130.

<sup>198</sup> In another passage, Heidegger also states that the “*das Man* selbst is a modification of the authentic self.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 317.

<sup>199</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 12. Macquarrie and Robinson translate *ist in sie hineingeraten* as “got itself into them.” I have used Wrathall’s term “stumbled into” to capture the contrast

some of these possibilities and not others. And we will do so with differing degrees of conscious decision. Perhaps I made a conscious decision to become a philosophy professor or to train for a marathon. But I might never have made a specific decision to become a basketball fan. Most of our possibilities and the way we take them up are not uniquely our own. That is, typically we do things as one does them: “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as one takes pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as one sees and judges; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as one shrinks back; we find ‘shocking’ what one finds shocking.”<sup>200</sup> The possibilities afforded us are largely shaped by others and, in part, this is what allows our actions to be intelligible to each other. But this does not condemn us to inauthenticity in a problematic way. What matters for authenticity, as an ideal of existence, is the manner in which we inhabit those possibilities. Heidegger thinks we can take them over anonymously or we can take hold of them as our own: “The self of everyday Dasein is the das-Man self, which we distinguish from the authentic self—that is, from the self which has been taken hold of in its own way.” The self for Heidegger is a “way of existing” and not an entity underlying our actions.<sup>201</sup> The authentic self, then, is a way of existing that has been taken hold of in a certain way. But what does this way amount to and how can it come about?

---

from the “choice” of the first set of possibilities. Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation can do that, if you think of people who have a knack for getting themselves into trouble, despite their best intentions. It should capture a somewhat unintentional way of becoming entangled in activities and purposes.

<sup>200</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 164.

<sup>201</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 167.



At some point, in the existential story Heidegger tells, I realize there are insufficient justificatory reasons for my being the person I am. To be sure, we can give explanatory reasons for our practical identities and give some justification for maintaining certain inherited activities or tendencies and not pursuing others. But Heidegger thinks these reasons are ultimately inadequate justification for who we have become, for our way of existing. Much of who we are is radically contingent and underdetermined by our justificatory reasons. When and where we are born, who our parents are, our physical and physiological characteristics, and considerations of this nature, for example, influence our lives in pervasive ways, affecting things as varied as our preferences in food and politics, our temperaments, and our beliefs about what constitutes a moral or meaningful life. We can come to defend these preferences, temperaments, and beliefs as if their footing were far more secure and eternal than it is.

All this could make it sound as if it is a problem that we are influenced by others and that the world in which we live is shaped by others. But that isn't the point. Remember that one sense of *das Man* is as an existential structure that allows our actions to be intelligible (to others and to ourselves). Through others we are introduced into the meaningful world made possible through practices, language, and a sense of the good: "the world is always the one that I share with others."<sup>202</sup> We are social beings, always already caught up in relationships, and we are often complicit in the *das Man*. As Heidegger describes his use of "others," "we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the 'I' stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among

---

<sup>202</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 118.

whom one is too.”<sup>203</sup> We are part of the others, part of *das Man*, part of the social world that shapes available options. And for our actions and speech to be intelligible to ourselves, we need to act in ways that are understandable to others. So when Heidegger claims that we lack ultimate justification for the people we are, he is not trying to undermine the social fabric that makes our lives meaningful. Instead, he is describing the occasion that makes it possible for us to make the norms and values we have inherited uniquely our own. And this is where the pernicious *das Man* enters the picture.

When we use *das Man* as an agential scapegoat, instead of taking responsibility for who we are and what we do, we pass the responsibility for our way of being to *das Man*. We blame (often anonymous) others for our tastes and actions. Instead of pursuing a path that resonates with us or that expresses our beliefs, feelings, or values (even if the actions are virtually indistinguishable), we can simply defer to the norms of our society, doing what is expected of us or is in vogue because it is expected or in vogue. Following or being absorbed into (pernicious) *das Man* is problematic for three, interrelated reasons.

First, *das Man* can deprive “the particular Dasein of its answerability.”<sup>204</sup> Passing off the responsibility for who we are to *das Man* makes things easier for the individual—lessening the need for us to decide what to wear, eat, or watch. One need only follow the right media outlets or social networking sites and act accordingly. But because my existence is essentially mine, this way of disburdening myself of the burden of choosing my life is a rejection of the sort of being I am.

---

<sup>203</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 118.

<sup>204</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 127.

Second, *das Man* can lead to a potentially worrisome conformity. For instance, we can let our choices in entertainment be dictated by *das Man* and not by our own preferences and/or judgments about what is enjoyable or worthwhile: “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *das Man* takes pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature as *das Man* sees and judges.”<sup>205</sup> In *The Plague*, Camus describes conventional emotions, like grief, as “traded on the marketplace, mass-produced.”<sup>206</sup> Instead of a grief unique to the situation, they are left with “set phrases of ordinary conversation.”<sup>207</sup> The natural disinclination some have toward conformity could be partly because in mere conformity one does not develop and/or fails to exercise one’s own capacity to direct one’s life.

And this takes us to a third worry about *das Man* as agential scapegoat. When we submit ourselves to *das Man* in this way, we make ourselves complicit in the way the exceptional and original are suppressed:

“[*das Man*] keeps watch over everything exceptional that thrusts itself to the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed. Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. Every secret loses its force.”<sup>208</sup>

Different interpretations of Heidegger’s overall project highlight different shortcomings of *das Man* and the inauthentic lives that problematically depend on it. Some focus on the loss of genius or innovative discovery or creation (whether in science, art, or athletic

---

<sup>205</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 126-127.

<sup>206</sup> Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Modern Library College Edition, 1965), 69.

<sup>207</sup> Camus, *The Plague*, 69-70.

<sup>208</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 127.

competition); others focus on the lack of individuality in a society (allegedly) increasingly composed of automaton-like people; others emphasize the failure to take responsibility for oneself as a serious existential shortcoming.

Of course these bleed into one another and are not always cleanly separated. But my main point is to distinguish between *das Man*<sub>1</sub>, which is unavoidable if one is to live an intelligible life, from *das Man*<sub>2</sub>, which prevents one from becoming authentic (from taking ownership of one's life).<sup>209</sup> If we blur the different senses of *das Man* together, we end up with conceptions of authenticity that lean toward suggesting that authenticity is primarily a matter of separating oneself from others. On this view, we are inauthentic when we live in ways set up by society and by others, and if we want to be authentic, we must detach ourselves from the norms of our society and blaze a new trail. But "rugged individualist" authenticity may not be a tenable position. That's not to say that someone couldn't stress the importance of setting out on one's own path. But if one pushes the individualist account too far, it can fail to appreciate the way in which the ability to blaze a new trail depends on others, if only because the world in which these new trails are intelligible—to others but even to ourselves—depends on others. The challenge of authenticity, then, is to live in the world shaped by *das Man*<sub>1</sub> (existential structure) without succumbing to the temptation to

---

<sup>209</sup> There are two further questions regarding *das Man*. The first is how pervasive *das Man* is. Is *das Man* just a conformism that could be avoided? Or is it global? The second is how fine-grained and sophisticated *das Man* is. Is *das Man* necessarily clumsy in how it navigates the world? Or can *das Man* be quite skilled and adept but still generic?

The distinction between *das Man* as existential structure and *das Man* as agential scapegoat is important for answering the first question. In answering the second question, I think, in principle, it is possible for an individual to defer to *das Man* and still be adept at navigating the world. But the way Heidegger describes *das Man* and the public suggests that an individual who defers to *das Man* cannot avoid some degree of clumsy or inexperienced navigation of the practical context.

pass off the responsibility for who we are (for our agential sins, benign or otherwise) onto *das Man*<sub>2</sub> (the agential scapegoat).

For Heidegger, the fact that our justificatory reasons are ultimately inadequate opens the door for us to own ourselves, to become authentic.<sup>210</sup> By acknowledging that we are responsible for who we are, even if the possibilities we take up are not ones we originally created or chose, we resist the tendency to avoid “responsibility for being answerable for my self,” for the self I have become.<sup>211</sup> And this avoidance lies at the heart of inauthenticity (or disownedness). Instead of acting authentically in “anticipatory resoluteness,” we flee from our responsibility.

In Heidegger’s account of anticipatory resoluteness, death is crucial to our ability to take responsibility for our lives and live authentic lives. The centrality of death to Heidegger’s conception of human agency combined with the difficulty of determining exactly what “death” is for Heidegger has led to an extensive and divided literature. Part of this is due to Heidegger’s difficult prose. And it is exacerbated by the fact that when he contrasts dying with perishing and demising, he uses these terms in unconventional ways.<sup>212</sup>

I will briefly explain Heidegger’s death-related terminology, particularly focusing on how death differs from demise and perishing, and on why Heidegger thinks death is central

---

<sup>210</sup> In *Dasein Disclosed*, John Haugeland translates *Eigentlichkeit* as “ownedness” in contrast to Macquarrie and Robinson’s “authentic.” Haugeland, *Dasein Disclosed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2013.

<sup>211</sup> Mark Wrathall, “Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self,” in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and the Self* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 206.

<sup>212</sup> Iain Thomson has an excellent introductory discussion of these issues. “Death and Demise in *Being and Time*,” 260-264, in particular.

to human existence and ultimately makes authentic human existence possible. For Heidegger, death is “the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general.”<sup>213</sup> Existence is a technical term referring to the uniquely human way of being. Death, then, refers to the closing down of existential possibilities and not the cessation of biological function. Of course, these typically go hand in hand. But they could (and some interpreters of Heidegger think often do) come apart.

If this is right, death is, counter intuitively, something one could (biologically speaking) live through. But what would this look like? When interpreting Heidegger’s conception of existential death, one challenge is to make it radical enough to do what he thinks it can while keeping it distinct from perishing and demising. Heidegger says death is the “possibility of the impossibility of existence,” but “existence” is Dasein’s way of being, quite distinct from the sense of “existence” used when asking whether, say, the Loch Ness monster or black holes exist. Human existence is tied up with our pursuing projects and pressing into particular possibilities. Existence can become impossible, on this view, when one can no longer pursue the projects or possibilities that are constitutive of who one is. Major changes in one’s life—in interests, relationships, or career—can lead to existential death because one can no longer pursue the possibilities and projects that have shaped one’s existence. Sometimes this is described in terms of world collapse. If my world has been constituted by my identity as a father or teacher, but I can no longer engage with the world as a father or teacher, then in an important way my world collapses. I can no longer be the person I am (or was). But because this sort of world collapse need not coincide with the cessation of physiological function (what Heidegger calls “perishing”), existential death is

---

<sup>213</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 262.

something one could survive. In principle, one can be quite physiologically healthy even as one's core projects and identities collapse. And, further, if one goes on to pursue new interests and/or develop new relationships, for example, someone could survive (Heideggerian) death.<sup>214</sup>

In fact, on Iain Thomson's account, Heideggerian death not only can but seemingly must come apart from the cessation of biological function. According to Thomson, we die when our fundamental life projects collapse and we continue to (try to) engage in projects that are no longer live options. When we fill the food bowl for the deceased pet, we try to do an action that can't happen anymore. In Heideggerian terms, we are projecting ourselves into a world that has collapsed.<sup>215</sup> In such instances, as Thomson puts it, we "experience ourselves as a kind of bare existential projecting without any existentiell projects to project ourselves into."<sup>216</sup>

This mis-match between our projecting and our world is at the heart of existential angst (or anxiety). The realization that no single, specific life project, no role or practical

---

<sup>214</sup> On such a view, one could ask if the same person survives. If one's projects, character, and/or desires change enough, it may be unclear if it is the same person. For Bernard Williams, for example, because one's character is closely connected to one's identity for him, for future and past experiences to be ours in a robust way depends on our having (to some degree) the same character throughout. And this helps explain his view that Elina Makropulos could have exhausted the possibilities for novel experiences in a mere 300 years. Her life has already become undesirable because with her character, Williams seems to think, there are only so many experiences that she could have. Presumably, if her character were to change too much, her life would no longer be recognizably hers.

<sup>215</sup> In *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear discusses the same phenomenon on a societal level when he claims that, after the move to the reservation, planting a coup stick was no longer a viable option for Plenty Coup and other Crows. *Radical Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>216</sup> Thomson, "Death and Demise," 269.

identity, seamlessly fits us is what Heidegger calls *Unheimlichkeit*: “Understanding the call discloses one’s own Dasein in the *Unheimlichkeit* of its individualization. The *Unheimlichkeit* . . . becomes genuinely disclosed by the *Befindlichkeit* [state-of-mind] of anxiety. *Unheimlichkeit* is usually translated “uncanniness” but literally closer to not-being-at-home-ness.”<sup>217</sup> The realization that there is no single right way for us to live or one specific, ultimately correct life path and that the specific shape of my life does not fit me perfectly in some sort of deep, immutable way is key to Heidegger’s concept of “anticipation,” part of the “anticipatory resoluteness” that defines authenticity. I “anticipate” or “run-toward” (*vorlaufen*) my (existential) death as I realize that the projects constitutive of my specific existence can collapse. This realization, however, can be liberating. It returns to us (or helps us recognize) the freedom to choose our lives from among the possibilities afforded us. But this freedom is not unlimited. We are constrained by our facticity—our physical characteristics, our upbringings, the shape of the societies in which we live, and so forth. As Heidegger puts it, we are “thrown possibility through and through.”<sup>218</sup> In anticipatory resoluteness, we realize we are free to choose from among the projects afforded in what Thomson calls “the storehouse of publicly intelligible roles inherited from the tradition” without the belief that any single role or combination of roles is ultimately justified.<sup>219</sup>

We don’t start from scratch, however. Because who we already are “grounds who [we] can be,” the resoluteness of authenticity does not “require making a clean break with

---

<sup>217</sup> Thomson translates it as “homelessness.” Thomson, “Death and Demise,” 270.

<sup>218</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 144.

<sup>219</sup> Thomson, “Death and Demise,” 274.



one's past and setting out on some wild adventure."<sup>220</sup> William Blattner describes the resoluteness of authenticity as a return of Dasein to the everyday, "to who it already is, but with a clear-sighted understanding of the normative demands inherent in who it already is. Resoluteness is a mode of living in the anyone, a modification of everydayness."<sup>221</sup> As Heidegger puts it, Dasein is "called forth to the possibility of taking over, in existing, even that thrown entity which it is."<sup>222</sup> Authentically being one's self does not require separation from the past or from one's present life, then. Instead, it is a way of taking over the life into which we find ourselves thrown, including the social expectations and norms that come with it.<sup>223</sup> I do have one worry about Blattner's interpretation here, however. I'm not sure clear-sighted here necessarily means only that one sees more clearly what the demands are or how to navigate them. I think that's part of it. But there is more to it than that. The clear-sightedness Heidegger has in mind also involves the ability to see more clearly that we are taking up one set of demands from a variety of other potential options. As Heidegger puts it, "one is liberated from one's lostness in possibilities accidentally thrust upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities. . . . Anticipation . . . shatters all one's tenaciousness to

---

<sup>220</sup> Blattner, "Authenticity and Resoluteness," 331.

<sup>221</sup> Blattner, "Authenticity and Resoluteness," 331.

<sup>222</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 287.

<sup>223</sup> "Thus what is distinctive of resolute Dasein is *not* the *content* of who it is but rather *how* it is who it is. Resolute Dasein is itself in a persistent and surefooted way, even if the conformism of the general situation seeks to make it back down from who it finds itself to be" (Blattner, "Authenticity and Resoluteness," 333, emphasis original).

whatever existence one has reached.”<sup>224</sup> Or if we put it in terms of practical identities, we see more clearly the various possible roles and life paths open to us, and we are thus better able to pursue a life of our own. And even if we do return in large part to the life that was “accidentally thrust upon us,” we do so differently. Aware that our lives are made up of a fraction of the pursuits, desires, judgments, projects, preferences that are available to us, we are better able to purposively choose our life, rather than merely continue in the life in which we were raised. I could still continue to be a teacher and a father, say, but I see that my life could have (and still could) be very different than it is. And this, Heidegger thinks, frees us to choose a life and even embrace it, but without the insecure “tenaciousness” that tends to typify a life lost in *das Man* (as agential scapegoat).

Blattner describes the stance of the resolute individual as “the flexibility to see beyond the narrow confines of one’s rigid vision.”<sup>225</sup> “Resolute Dasein,” he goes on, “is more flexible and attuned to how it navigates the world of [*das Man*]. This flexibility requires the ability to ‘take back prior commitments and habitual modes of activity.’”<sup>226</sup> The flexible individual is not flighty or one of fickle commitments, however. Instead, the resolute individual is one who is loyal to who it is. Thus Heideggerian authenticity does involve being true to oneself, “but the self one must be true to is not one’s true self, some deep self hiding behind the façade of the every day [*das Man*]. What authenticity requires is steady and

---

<sup>224</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 264.

<sup>225</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 325-326.

<sup>226</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 333.

steadfast loyalty to who one factually and currently is.”<sup>227</sup> By encountering our existential death and realizing the fragility of our life projects, we can see more clearly the variety of life paths available and our responsibility for who we are.<sup>228</sup> In becoming authentic, then, the individual need not radically alter the content of her life, and may not alter the content at all. But authenticity changes how she takes up the content and leads to less deferential and stubborn reasons for doing what she does. Sometimes, however, this could lead to change in one’s practical identity. As we see more clearly our factual possibilities, the different practical identities available to us, we may see something amiss in our practical identity—maybe because it doesn’t fit as well as we’d thought, or because we have misinterpreted what is involved in the life, or for some other reason.

The inauthentic writer might think about what to do in the following way: “A writer does this or that—say, wears certain clothes and not others. I am a writer. So I will wear certain clothes.” As the individual becomes more authentic, the reasoning changes the order/emphasis and could change the content altogether. It might go something like this: I am (have taken over) a writer. And being a writer involves a certain way of being. Because of this writerly way of being—this way of engaging with the world—certain reasons stand out as salient. This assumes that the options available to me are shaped by others in myriad ways. I will act on the basis of those reasons that stand out on the basis of my writerly way of

---

<sup>227</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 333-334. Heidegger says, “The world which is ready-to-hand does not become another one in content . . . but one’s being toward the ready-to-hand understandingly and concernfully, and one’s solicitious being with others are now given a definite character in terms of their ownmost ability-to-be-their-Selves.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 297.

<sup>228</sup> “In light of the for-the-sake-of-which of one’s self-chosen ability-to-be [Seinkönnen], resolute Dasein frees itself for its world.” Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 298.

being. Because the way I engage with the world as a writer could make certain things show up that are not (typically) thought to be part of the “writer” practical identity, I could (and probably should) depart from the conventional way of being a writer.

I become authentic as I take over the “dispositions, habits, and standards I inherit as a result of the accidents of my birth and upbringing” and weave them to form a coherent whole with the possibilities afforded me in the practical identities I pursue.<sup>229</sup> As I resolutely take over as my own the possibilities afforded me, certain affordances of the world stand out as my reasons, soliciting me to certain types or ways of action.<sup>230</sup> If someone were to ask me when I became a father, a Heideggerian answer would depend as much on some personal commitment to take up as my own the fatherly affordances of the world as it would on my son’s birthday. My child’s birth (and the child himself) are part of my thrownness (and facticity), my existential situatedness, but how I take up the affordances of fatherhood factors prominently in the way the world solicits me.

Before we proceed to our analysis of the relationship between Kierkegaard and Heidegger, I want to briefly address a potential concern. How is personal change compatible with authenticity if authenticity involves being true to who you are now? We often change over the course of our lives—whether in subtle or dramatic ways—and it may seem that changing is being in some sense inauthentic. When we talk of being true to ourselves, it can seem problematically self-focused and static. If I am true to myself right now, how will I grow as an individual? And with personal change, there can be a sort of agential clumsiness.

---

<sup>229</sup> Heidegger’s term for this inheritance is “disposedness.” Wrathall, “Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self,” 206-207.

<sup>230</sup> Wrathall, “Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self,” 211-212.

As I try to develop a taste and appreciation for the symphony, I might misstep and seem to be a poser. Or as I try to act on newly acquired moral beliefs, I could come across as insincere. Are there resources in this account of authenticity to explain this apparent predicament? I think Heidegger's conception of temporality as it relates to human existence gives us the resources to explain how one can be authentic even as one changes, perhaps even how authenticity requires a certain kind of change in who we are (or appear to be). Because we are more than our present situation, we can change who we are in significant ways, and authenticity involves the right relation to one's past, present, and future.

As we try change who we are—including the things we care about, the way we value things, our preferences, tastes, and desires—and try to change our lives to reflect it, we can fall short. This might seem like the paradigm of inauthenticity or insincerity. Imagine a friend who has been caught up in materialism but now claims to be committed to decreasing economic inequality and avoiding being complicit in labor exploitation. If in a moment of consumer weakness, his actions were to belie this commitment, we might say, "You say you care about eradicating world poverty, but you keep spending your money on frivolous niceties instead of donating to charities that improve the situation." And there is surely something not quite settled in our friend. But we are working with a problematic view of authenticity if someone is necessarily inauthentic for trying to change (even if she falls short of her newly embraced direction).

Authenticity requires a certain kind of orientation toward the past, present, and future. It involves taking up our current way of being, but that way of being is always already stretching forward and backward temporally. As Joseph Raz puts it, "we must be true to who we are, true to it even as we try to change" and that "to deny our past is to be false to

ourselves.”<sup>231</sup> Heidegger agrees that we must have the right sort of relation to our past, our current situation, and our future possibilities in order to be authentic. Who we are largely depends on our past, as do our future possibilities.<sup>232</sup> Depending on the details, however, our new but backsliding social-justice-oriented friend can be authentic even as she seeks to change. In fact, given her past, it would probably be more inauthentic if the transition were (or appeared to be) seamless. It will probably take time for a new aspect of a practical identity to take hold and become natural. Such a change requires her newly embraced values, preferences, and dispositions to permeate her practical reasoning and motivational capacities. This often takes time, because it involves existing in such a way that one’s orientation toward the world is transformed.

There is thus a sense in which authenticity for Heidegger is a matter of being true to oneself. But it is a matter of bring true to oneself by recognizing the nature of human freedom. We act authentically as we act in recognition of the possibility-oriented nature of human existence—we find ourselves with factual possibilities—while also recognizing our existential situation—we find ourselves thrown into a particular situation, with particular characteristics. Authenticity involves living in such a way that appreciates both the possibility and limits that structure human existence.

---

<sup>231</sup> Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>232</sup> In track and field, you sometimes hear the saying, “If you want to be an elite distance runner, choose your parents wisely.” The tongue-in-cheek principle applies to many areas, as suggested by the recent *Economist* article, “Choose Your Parents Wisely,” 26 July 2014.

#### **IV. Kierkegaardian Selfhood and Heideggerian Authenticity**

Regarding the question of personal change for a theory of authenticity, I would even argue that, rather than personal change being a difficulty for a theory of authenticity, agential authenticity is important for genuine personal change. To take ownership in the sense required for authenticity opens the door for individuals to guide their lives in a non-trivial way, to see their role in their actions and, consequently, increases their ability to re-orient their lives when necessary instead of merely conforming to custom, or habit, or social pressures. Authenticity need not always require a drastic renovation of one's life. But it does require one to take a more active orientation towards the stuff that makes up one's life. Rather than merely receiving a life, authenticity requires us to take up our lives as our own. Drawing from Kierkegaard, it requires us to take responsibility for our lives—by seeing our role in the selves that we are, by seeing our agential hand in the world, and by taking responsibility for the standards that we let guide our actions. Drawing from Heidegger, it requires us to take ownership for our lives. This requires a certain insight into the contingent nature of our practical identities, but authenticity takes that contingency as the occasion for actively and less deferentially taking up the reasons, desires, cares, preferences, and projects that make up our lives.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss the relationship between Heidegger and Kierkegaard with regard to authenticity. Specifically, I offer brief criticisms of William Blattner's and Iain Thomson's characterizations of the relationship between the two. I conclude by looking at the value but also the limits of authenticity, so conceived.

In "Authenticity and Resoluteness," Blattner downplays the extent to which the Christian approach of authenticity, exemplified by Kierkegaard, illuminates Heidegger's

conception of authenticity. To be sure, Kierkegaard's treatment of anxiety, sin, and individuality is steeped in the Protestant tradition and the robust individuality he has in mind does depend on a certain kind of religiosity. But even if Kierkegaard was working from a Christian perspective, the existentialist framework he presents seems (at the least) largely compatible with Heidegger's non-religious (or less clearly religious) framework. I think the clear parallels in Heidegger with each of Kierkegaard's problematic individuals suggest deep common concerns. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger try to think about how one can be an individual in a world that is largely not of one's own making. They share the worry that we can live our lives going through the motions or by simply inhabiting a pre-developed space. Kierkegaard's spiritless individual and Heidegger's inauthentic individual who simply does "what one does" in a given situation both fall short in this way. The question of responsibility also looms large for both. Kierkegaard's individual who experiences anxiety as guilt passes off the responsibility for her life to the law much in the same way Heidegger thinks we can be drawn to disburden ourselves of the responsibility for our way of living.<sup>233</sup> And finally, just as the problematic genius of fate hides from the fact that he guides his life, so can Dasein use the agential scapegoat *das Man*<sub>2</sub> to avoid taking hold of its possibilities, and *das Man*<sub>2</sub> readily hides how it has "tacitly relieved Dasein of the burden of explicitly choosing these possibilities."<sup>234</sup> Each of these points could and should be developed in more depth. The parallels are striking, however, and because there is a lot of leeway for how one should interpret the religious elements in Kierkegaard, Blattner's dismissal seems premature.

---

<sup>233</sup> See, for example, Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 127-128, 268.

<sup>234</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 268.



On the other hand, Iain Thomson, on the whole, appreciates Kierkegaard as key to understanding Heidegger's conception of authenticity, so my suggestion here is different. When Thomson describes the way Kierkegaard and Heidegger conceive of how becoming authentic affects one's life, I think he overestimates the difference between the two. Thomson seems to think that while for Kierkegaard becoming authentic may lead to very little change in the course of one's life (and one can think of various passages to support this view, including his discussion of the philistine tax collector and the knight of faith), for Heidegger, it is far less likely that one will continue in the same life path. Of course, it depends on what it means to continue in the same life path. If continuing with the same projects but with a more flexible, clear-sighted orientation toward them counts as a different life path, then Thomson is probably right. But, without certain qualifications, I think this threatens to underappreciate Heidegger's claim that authenticity is "an existentiell modification of *das Man*—of *das Man* as an essential existentielle."<sup>235</sup> Authenticity does not require that we break from a life path. And depending on one's situation, too radical departure from a life path is probably as likely to be inauthentic as not. Instead of a radical departure, authenticity typically involves living the life one finds oneself in, but with a new commitment, orientation, attitude toward that life.

By painting the Knight of Faith from *Fear and Trembling* as indistinguishable from a bourgeois philistine tax collector, Kierkegaard aims to establish as some sort of existential ideal a life that, to an observer, is indistinguishable from a life immersed in simple pleasures. The richness of the life isn't in the content but in the individual's orientation toward the content. And although there is a prominent strand of Heideggerian interpretation within

---

<sup>235</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 130.

which authenticity is equated with a certain kind of skillful activity, one sensitive to the nuances of the concrete situation, there seems to be space, particularly given the Kierkegaardian influence, for an understanding of authenticity in which the authentic individual is (in some sense) indistinguishable from the inauthentic individual. This claim here depends on discussion earlier in the chapter and is underdeveloped here. But it suggests a possible way to think about selfhood as an achievement without tying it to a certain kind of practical expertise. The achievement of the authentic individual is not so much in taking up something new, original, or innovative, but primarily in making one's life one's own. And this can happen in lives of a variety of shapes and sizes.

I would like to briefly note another point of intersection between Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Images of the fall and talk of falling play important roles in both accounts. But while Kierkegaard sees the fall—whether Adam's or any of ours—as the crucial step to selfhood, Heidegger describes falling as a tendency that prevents us from owning up to our individuality by becoming absorbed in tasks of our everyday world. This absorption is, problematically, a way to flee from our anxiety which shows we are free to choose among the projects available and that we are responsible for who we are. For Heidegger, falling is a way we fail to become selves. However, the contrast to falling—owning up to who we are and taking up our existence resolutely—is not that different from the fall of sin that Kierkegaard sees as crucial to becoming a self.

As a society, we tend to value authenticity. Although we tend to conformism in all sorts of ways, even that conformism is sometimes couched in and disguised by language of authenticity. Much of pop-culture's talk of authenticity, however, trends toward self-indulgence. As I have shown, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, two of the key thinkers of

authenticity, have something different in mind than the stuff of ad campaigns. For one, taking ownership of one's life in the sense required for authenticity opens the door for individuals to guide their lives in a non-trivial way, to see their role in their actions and, consequently, increases their ability to re-orient their lives when necessary instead of merely conforming to custom, habit, or social pressures. That is not to say that authenticity requires a drastic renovation of the content of one's life. In fact, often the opposite is in order. Often authenticity is a matter of returning to the life—the commitments, relationships, values, projects, past times—we find ourselves in, but to return to it more aware of its fragility and the way in which it is up to us to live as we see fit.

Chapter Three  
A Life of One's Own: Why Did The Butler Do It?

“I am much of what my parents and especially my grandparents were—inherited stature, coloring, brains, bones (that part unfortunate), plus transmitted prejudices, culture, scruples, likings, moralities, and moral errors that I defend as if they were personal and not familial.”

Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose*<sup>236</sup>

“Because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it can, in its very being, ‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or can only ‘seem’ to do so.”

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*<sup>237</sup>

We have now explored to some extent the two ideals of autonomy and authenticity.

Autonomy, of self-governance, is a matter of acting in accordance with one's practical identity. Authenticity, on the other hand, is a matter of taking responsibility and ownership for one's practical identity, of identifying in a certain way with the life that one leads. On the face of it, autonomy--the ability to govern oneself according to one's practical identity—and authenticity—taking ownership for one's life—both seem to be good things. And they certainly can help each other. As we become more autonomous and more authentic, we can more effectively pursue things that we have come to identify with. But depending on one's practical identity, there can be tension between autonomy and authenticity. In this chapter, we look at one such instance.

Toward the end of the Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens, a traditional and now antiquated English butler, compares himself unfavorably to his former employer,

---

<sup>236</sup> Wallace Stegner, *Angle of Repose* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1971), 3.

<sup>237</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 42.

Lord Darlington.<sup>238</sup> A butler could think his employer's life amounted to more than his own for a variety of reasons. Earlier, Stevens himself gives one:

“Each of us harboured the desire to make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world, and saw that, as professionals, the surest means of doing so would be to serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted.”<sup>239</sup>

Through a combination of position and (perhaps) capacity, great gentlemen, Stevens suggests, can guide the course of history in ways professionals generally do not. But Stevens' negative self-assessment hinges on something else. Despite Darlington's misguided involvement with the Nazi party and the fact that he turned out to be Germany's pawn in pre-WWII England, Stevens remarks:

“He [Darlington] wasn't a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, *he chose it*, he can say that at least.”<sup>240</sup>

Stevens is less charitable toward himself:

“As for my self, I cannot even claim that [I chose my life]. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that?”<sup>241</sup>

The primary difference for Stevens is that Darlington *chose* his own path while he *trusted*. But given the problematic life Darlington chose, Stevens' apparently high regard for Darlington

---

<sup>238</sup> One could replace Mr. Stevens with Mr. Carson or Mrs. Hughes or another character from the more recent *Downton Abbey* and much of the general picture and even some specifics would remain in tact.

<sup>239</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 116.

<sup>240</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 243, emphasis added.

<sup>241</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 243, emphasis added.

seems to depend on his inordinately valuing choosing one's own life and making one's own mistakes.

It is nothing new to value choosing one's own life. Well before Ishiguro's novel, the refrain of Sinatra's "My Way" claimed that the individual doing it his way was more important than one's successes or failures, one's fond memories or regrets. That Sinatra's claim resonated is evidenced by remakes by artists as varied as Sid Vicious, The Three Tenors, and the University of Massachusetts Minuteman Marching Band.

Figuring out what it means to live a life of one's own also has a long history.

Describing Germans coming of age in the 1770s, Terry Pinkard writes:

"Trying to interpret their world, they found that the institutions and practices surrounding them gave them little help, since they could not 'find' themselves reflected in those practices. . . . Yet they did not find themselves without direction or guidance; they still lived in an orderly, determined society that had carved out specific roles for them to play. They thus took on a kind of duality in their own lives, an awareness . . . of what they were supposed to do, a sense that their life's path had already been laid out for them, and an equally compelling awareness that they were not 'determined' by these pre-determined social paths, that it was 'their own' lives they had to lead, all of which presented them with what can be properly called a pressing moral as well as a political question: how to live, how to keep faith with their families, their friends, their social context, sometimes even their religion, while maintaining this alienated 'dual' stance toward their own selves."<sup>242</sup>

How to live a life of one's own continues to be a major question of our time, appearing in forms ranging from teenage rebellion/non-conformism to mid-life crises to disillusionment with the faith or political views of one's upbringing. Bringing together Stegner and Heidegger, how can someone choose and win *himself* when he is "much of what [his] parents and especially [his] grandparents were"?<sup>243</sup>

---

<sup>242</sup> Pinkard, *German Philosophy, 1760-1860*, 10-11.

<sup>243</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 42; Stegner, *Angle of Repose*, 3.

In this chapter, I examine autonomy and authenticity as two distinct ways our actions and our lives can (or can fail to) be our own. In analytic philosophy of agency, autonomy has been the key concept, taking its more recent starting point from Harry Frankfurt's contrast between "movements of a person's body that are mere happenings in his history and those that are his own activities."<sup>244</sup> The task has been to explain what makes certain movements uniquely mine. Frankfurt's hierarchical model suggests that free actions happen when first-order desires mesh with higher-order desires. But many have developed and/or criticized this account. Gary Watson, for one, argues that the relevant mesh is between our motivational and our evaluational capacities and not between desires of different orders. He thinks we act freely when we act in accordance with what we judge valuable. In the phenomenological tradition, Heidegger's concept of *Eigentlichkeit* (usually translated authenticity) is another way to describe how some actions are uniquely ours. Despite their similarities, autonomy and authenticity typically have different focuses. Autonomous action often contrasts with movements resulting from forces outside of the individual's control, whether stemming from coercion, manipulation, depression, or the like. By contrast, the *eigen* of *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity) suggests one's own in contrast to fake or phony or mere conformity to social expectations. An agent is autonomous as her actions are properly under her guidance, being appropriately self-governed or self-controlled; an agent is authentic to the extent that she takes ownership for her life and does not simply defer to others.

Living a life of one's own involves two aspects—autonomy and authenticity—and these coincide with the two senses in which Mr. Stevens uses dignity. The first sense

---

<sup>244</sup> Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," 59.

(Dignity<sub>1</sub>) depends on the individual's actions being in keeping with one's professional role. The other (Dignity<sub>2</sub>) depends on "choosing" one's life, on taking ownership for one's life and not simply deferring to others. My accounts of authenticity and autonomy draw on Heidegger's account of authenticity and Christine Korsgaard's account of practical identity and its role in autonomous action.<sup>245</sup> My goal is not to show how Heidegger's or Korsgaard's account of human agency is preferable to the other.<sup>246</sup> Instead, I suggest how a life becoming more one's own along one dimension can lead it to become less one's own along another.

In Mr. Stevens' life, we see autonomy and authenticity come apart in worrisome ways.<sup>247</sup> A life becoming more one's own along one dimension can lead to it becoming less one's own along another. With Mr. Stevens, a sort of hyper-autonomy seems to threaten his ability to live an authentic life. Because the process of identity construction and identification is complex, we can autonomously live lives that detract from our broader interests in and judgments about the good life, including our interest in living an authentic life.

## **II. A Butler's Dignity: Autonomy and Authenticity**

---

<sup>245</sup> Both Heidegger and Korsgaard cite Aristotle and Kant as major influences, so bringing them together should come as little surprise. But because they approach these influences so differently, it is not so simple. While Heidegger largely attempts to point out the shortcomings in Kant's work in order to make space for his contribution, Korsgaard's goal has been described as keeping "the 'must' that Kant put into morality while humanizing morality's source" through her use of, *inter alia*, the concept of practical identities. G.A. Cohen describes Korsgaard's goal this way in "Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law," *Sources of Normativity*, 174, 188.

<sup>246</sup>See, for example, Scot Rouse's "Heidegger, Sociality, and Human Agency" in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2013. In his dissertation, *Thrown Projection: An Interpretation and Defense of the Hermeneutic Conception of the Self in Heidegger's Being and Time* (2011), Rouse compares the accounts of human identity put forward by Harry Frankfurt, Christine Korsgaard, and Martin Heidegger.

<sup>247</sup> Although accounts of human agency sometimes discuss both notions, because they do not explicitly pull them apart, they can bleed into each other.



Those familiar with the novel *Remains of the Day* or its film adaptation likely find Stevens an odd case study for autonomy and authenticity. Butlers of this period are unlikely candidates, but Stevens especially prides himself in subordinating his interests, opinions, and even happiness in the service of his employer. Kwame Anthony Appiah estimates that “few readers of Ishiguro’s novel will aspire to be a butler; least of all the sort of butler that Mr. Stevens aimed to be.”<sup>248</sup> One reason few would aspire to it is that being a butler at this time in England seems an intrinsically subordinate profession, limiting individuals’ ability to direct their lives.

Hoping for a moral psychology reflecting the whole motley crew, including the “disaffected, refractory, silly, satanic, or punk,” David Velleman indicted the philosophy of action literature for relying on a bland type of agent.<sup>249</sup> In a similar spirit, I hope for accounts of autonomy and authenticity that explain how individuals like Stevens—seeming to lack the freedom or self-determination central to robust human agency—can live lives of their own.<sup>250</sup>

Reflecting on his trusting Lord Darlington instead of choosing for himself what to do, Stevens regretfully asks: “What dignity is there in that?” Stevens, however, uses dignity in two different ways. And the sense of dignity central to this passage differs from the sense of dignity in play in most of the novel. Usually Stevens has Dignity<sub>1</sub> in mind: “the ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits . . . [only discarding the role when] he wills to do

---

<sup>248</sup> Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 10.

<sup>249</sup> Velleman, “The Guise of the Good,” *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 99.

<sup>250</sup> Another example is Thomas Hill’s deferential wife. “Servility and Self-Respect,” Hill, *Autonomy and Self-Respect*, 4-18.

so,” and this will only be “when he is entirely alone.”<sup>251</sup> Those lacking Dignity<sub>1</sub> “abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath.”<sup>252</sup> Dignity<sub>1</sub> corresponds to autonomy, the ability to effectively guide one’s actions in light of one’s practical identity.

When Stevens doubts his dignity because he did not choose his life, he has Dignity<sub>2</sub> in mind. Dignity<sub>2</sub> connects to authenticity in two related ways. First, actions or lives are authentic to the extent that they express where the agent really stands, sometimes described as expressing a “deep” or “true” self. And, second, as Kierkegaard and Heidegger conceive it, authenticity primarily involves doing things for one’s own reasons and not merely “trusting” in another authority—whether a scholar, a moral exemplar, or public opinion. One can still live the life recommended by some such authority, but the justification for doing so will go beyond “She told me to” or “That is what butlers do.” The recommended life path could reflect some deeply held values. Or, ultimately, it could simply be a matter of taking responsibility for who one is and not passing off the responsibility to someone else (even if one’s preferences, dispositions, and characteristics are not completely of one’s making). To the extent that his life fails to express his deepest values and his practical reasoning stops at Darlington’s wishes, Stevens’ Dignity<sub>2</sub> is underdeveloped. The dissonance between his values and actions comes out at his father’s death and when Miss Kenton, a former co-worker and once potential love interest, tells him of her plans to marry Mr.

---

<sup>251</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 42-43.

<sup>252</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 42.

Benn.<sup>253</sup> For Dignity<sub>2</sub> and authenticity, the emphasis is on whether the individual has chosen (in a fairly robust sense) the professional or practical identity and if it reflects something deep about the agent.

In summary, then, Dignity<sub>1</sub>—wearing one's professional role well—requires conforming one's actions to one's practical identity. Dignity<sub>2</sub>—choosing one's life—requires that the practical identity is one the individual has taken over as his or her own. For Mr. Stevens, Dignity<sub>1</sub> seems to handicap his Dignity<sub>2</sub>. By wearing the butler role so persistently and directing his actions in light of that self-conception (Dignity<sub>1</sub>/Autonomy), his ability to align his life with his broader values (Dignity<sub>2</sub>/Authenticity) is diminished.<sup>254</sup>

## II.1. Autonomy

To be self-governing, the forces moving agents to action must be appropriately connected to their guidance.<sup>255</sup> Different conceptions of autonomy disagree about the nature of this connection or about what constitutes the agent's guidance. For our purposes, an agent is autonomous to the extent that her actions flow from her practical identities.<sup>256</sup> In *Sources of*

---

<sup>253</sup> One could argue that Stevens' actions do reveal his deepest values or what he cares most about: Stevens just happens to value being a good butler more than other elements he also considers part of the good life—such as meaningful familial relationships. However, I think this doesn't do justice to Mr. Stevens in *Remains of the Day* or to the idea that we can act against what we most value.

<sup>254</sup> Like Suzy Killmister, I suggest authenticity and autonomy are scalar terms rather than as threshold concepts. See Killmister, "The Problem of Socialization," *Social Theory and Practice* 39(1), 95-119.

<sup>255</sup> See Sarah Buss's discussion of "Personal Autonomy" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>256</sup> "Flowing from" indicates that mere agreement between an individual's actions and those recommended by a practical identity is insufficient. Even if they result in the "right" actions for a given life, the agreement between actions and practical identity must come in the right

*Normativity*, Korsgaard defines the conception of one's practical identity as "a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking . . . You are a human being, a woman or a man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone's lover or friend, and so on."<sup>257</sup> These identities give us reasons and obligations. As a parent, I have reason to promote my child's well-being. Being a professor, on the other hand, gives me reasons to teach and write.<sup>258</sup> To the extent that I read with my child or cook a meal for my family *because* I am a parent, I act autonomously.

These are relatively simple cases. But practical identities are complex and we can be pulled in competing directions. I could have promised to help my child with a school project the same day I receive an urgent work deadline. Or like Stevens', you could be hosting a dinner with important political ramifications the night your father is on his deathbed.

Governing actions in conformity with our practical identities is difficult because practical identities are complex, potentially conflicting. We also often find ourselves with practical identities not of our making. Our lives are filled by various activities and pursuits—what Heidegger calls possibilities—and we come into these in a number of ways: some we have chosen; some we have stumbled into; and some we have "grown up in them already."<sup>259</sup>

---

way. For this reason, cases of coercion, manipulation, and hypnosis undermine autonomy.

<sup>257</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>258</sup> Our practical identities can be varied, even at odds, pulling us in different directions. Korsgaard sometimes suggests that in such cases it is not clear it is really the person acting, because, following Plato's position in the *Republic*, the agent is not yet unified and so cannot function as a whole.

<sup>259</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 12.

Korsgaard could be paraphrasing Heidegger when she says of practical identities: “Some we are born into, like being someone’s child or neighbor or being the citizen of a certain country. Some we adopt for reasons, like joining a profession that is worthwhile and suits your talents or devoting yourself to a cause in which you ardently believe. Many we adopt voluntarily, but without anything that is in more than a marginal sense a reason.”<sup>260</sup> Just as Stevens reflected with regret on not “choosing” his life, we can find ourselves caught up in lives not of our choosing that do not reflect what we (think we) value.

## II.2 Authenticity

Another way our lives can be ours is tracked by authenticity, sometimes described as “being true to oneself.” We can live lives we judge shallow or that don’t reflect what matters to us. Although his intention was different, Philip Littell described Edith Wharton as “‘living in the very thick’ of thin things,”<sup>261</sup> capturing what some take as the heart of (in)authenticity. Because authenticity emphasizes the individual agent’s preferences and values, the relevant standards of thinness are more subjective than the usual reading of Littell’s phrase. The existentialist tradition emphasizes self-ownership, taking one’s life over as one’s own, as the key to authenticity.<sup>262</sup> Self-ownership requires that we take our lives over as our own, even if we are not ultimately responsible for our current situation.<sup>263</sup> Heidegger’s term for this

---

<sup>260</sup> Christine Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 13.

<sup>261</sup> Philip Littell, *The New Republic*, 19 December 1914, 25.

<sup>262</sup> Heidegger’s term usually translated “authenticity” is *Eigentlichkeit*, which suggests ownership and, for this reason, John Haugeland translates as “ownedness.”

<sup>263</sup> In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche calls *causa sui* the best self-contradiction ever conceived. Galen Strawson takes a semi-Nietzschean position in claiming that the fact that we cannot

existential situatedness is “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*). We always find ourselves already thrown—enmeshed in relationships, speaking a language, having desires, involved in projects, and so forth. Human existence thus has a strong temporal component: every “situation is replete with its past and pregnant with its possible future.”<sup>264</sup> Authenticity involves taking over my thrownness and then projecting forward into the possibilities afforded me as my own.

The danger, Heidegger thinks, is that I can take over the possibilities afforded me as a generic self—das Man—and not as a unique individual. We can wear the right clothes, listen to the right music, read the right books, support the right humanitarian causes, and the like. But when we merely do what one does, we take over the content of our lives less authentically. In light of this worry, one could think the way to authenticity is to break from societal norms and blaze a trail, flouting convention or tradition.<sup>265</sup> But what distinguishes an authentic life from an inauthentic life is not the content of a life but the individual’s

---

be *causa sui* undermines moral responsibility. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), §21. In *Harm to Self* and “Sourcehood: Playing the Cards that Are Dealt You,” Joel Feinberg and John Fischer, respectively, criticize the Strawsonian position for thinking of “authenticity in such an exalted way that its criteria can never be satisfied.” Feinberg, *Harm to Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 33-34; John Martin Fischer, “Sourcehood: Playing the Cards that Are Dealt You,” *Deep Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2011.

<sup>264</sup> Haugeland, *Dasein Disclosed*, 144.

<sup>265</sup> Although part of the popular conception of authenticity, this approach falls under what Charles Taylor calls “degraded” conceptions of authenticity, which he thinks lead to a problematic soft relativism. Taylor argues that many conceptions of authenticity are debased variants in the way they focus excessively on self-fulfillment and overlook the degree to which our lives and identities depend on and are shaped by others. Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 29.

orientation toward the content of the life. Indeed, for Heidegger, authentic and inauthentic lives involve the same activities.<sup>266</sup>

As William Blattner puts it, who we already are “grounds who [we] can be,” so authenticity does not “require making a clean break with one’s past and setting out on some wild adventure.”<sup>267</sup> Blattner describes the resoluteness of authenticity as a return of the individual “to who it already is, but with a clear-sighted understanding of the normative demands inherent in who it already is. Resoluteness is a mode of living in the anyone, a modification of everydayness.”<sup>268</sup> Instead of breaking from one’s past or present life, authenticity is a way of taking up one’s life, including the social norms that come with it. In Heidegger’s words: “Authentic being-one’s-self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from *das Man*; it is rather an existentiell modification of *das Man* as an existential existentielle.”<sup>269</sup> Becoming more authentic does not entail radically altering the content of a life, and may not alter the content at all. But it does involve a change in how the individual takes up the content and leads to different, less deferential reasons for action.

---

<sup>266</sup> There is a deep similarity between the potential indistinguishability between Heidegger’s authentic and inauthentic life and Kierkegaard’s knight of faith and the philistine bourgeois tax collector. For a fuller discussion, see Hough’s *Kierkegaard’s Dancing Tax Collector*.

<sup>267</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 331.

<sup>268</sup> Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 331.

<sup>269</sup> Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 130. Blattner thinks the authentic agent may be more flexible and attuned in navigating the world of *das Man*: “Thus what is distinctive of resolute Dasein is *not* the *content* of who it is but rather *how* it is who it is. Resolute Dasein is itself in a persistent and surefooted way, even if the conformism of the general situation seeks to make it back down from who it finds itself to be.” Blattner, “Authenticity and Resoluteness,” 333.

In summary, then, we are autonomous to the extent that we act on the reasons and obligations stemming from our practical identities. And we are authentic to the extent, first, that our practical identities reflect what matters to us, and, second, that we take over our life as our own.

### **III. A Life (Partly) of One's Own: When Autonomy and Authenticity Come Apart**

In “agency at its best,” autonomy and authenticity feed into each other.<sup>270</sup> The autonomous agent more effectively pursues what they take themselves to have reason to do. And as one is more authentic, her projects better align with her values and she can wholeheartedly pursue actions flowing from her practical identities.<sup>271</sup> As authenticity lags, however, an individual with a pernicious hyper-autonomy can govern himself in a way that holds him back from the good life.

Stevens is autonomous (having Dignity<sub>1</sub>) to the extent that his actions flow from his practical identity. As a butler, Stevens has dedicated himself to the life of service and takes pride in his professional responsibilities. And given his understanding of the profession, including ceaselessly inhabiting his professional role, professional excellence requires him to suppress his opinions and desires.

---

<sup>270</sup> “Agency at its best” is Gideon Yaffe’s phrase but others have used it also. Yaffe, *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 72. Michael Bratman, for example, uses it when he claims that autonomous action need not be moral but that agency at its best would include would be both autonomous and moral. Bratman, *Structures of Agency*, 9.

<sup>271</sup> There may be deep, perhaps irresolvable, conflict between one’s various projects and even between one’s values. People can have exciting job offers places their spouses do not want to live. If they genuinely value their relationships and their careers, wholeheartedly pursuing one’s life will not mean abandoning either her career or the relationship. Instead, it requires the individual to negotiate (perhaps even embrace) the tensions between them.



Authenticity, or Dignity<sub>2</sub>, depends on a life reflecting what matters to the individual and on his taking ownership for the life. Because Stevens was not forced to become a butler and probably had other options, when he says he didn't choose his life, I take it to mean that his professional path does not (in hindsight) reflect his deepest values or his conception of the good life or that, in some relevant sense, he has not taken ownership for his life.

Given Stevens' understanding of his practical identity, his autonomy impedes his authenticity. His narrow conception of what a good butler is and the way he inhabits the role to a fault lead him to fare poorly in choosing his life in the sense required by authenticity. And, holding other things fixed, if Stevens were to redevelop his practical identity in light of broader beliefs about the good life—including relationships with his father and Miss Kenton he could have developed more fully—his success as a butler (as he conceives it) would suffer. His idea of what a good butler is could expand. But as he is through most of the novel, his autonomy impedes his authenticity.

Stevens takes seriously—perhaps too seriously—the idea that we should take care of what is “within our realm.”<sup>272</sup> Being a butler, as he understands it, is a matter of “providing the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies.”<sup>273</sup> If he is a butler of Dignity<sub>1</sub>, he must not worry himself with matters that do not affect the smooth running of the estate. Dignity<sub>1</sub>, for Stevens,

“has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits . . . The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and to inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They will wear their

---

<sup>272</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 199.

<sup>273</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 199.

professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone.”<sup>274</sup>

The butler with “dignity in keeping with his position” should never “allow himself to be ‘off duty’ in the presence of others.”<sup>275</sup> A butler of any quality “must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully.”<sup>276</sup> Lesser butlers, by contrast, are those “seen casting [the role] aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume.”<sup>277</sup>

As a result, even (perhaps especially) when potential distractions or interruptions are very personal, Stevens sets them aside if they impede his ability to manage the day’s events. When Darlington hosts a conference of international diplomats, for example, Stevens focuses on attending to the whims of the guests and ensuring things run smoothly.

The problem is that while he attends to these guests, his father is dying in an upstairs bedroom. In this display of hyper-autonomy, Stevens is determined to maintain his professional dignity and to act in keeping with his role as butler, come what may, and he controls his actions in keeping with his commitment. One could explain this in two ways. Maybe his actions reveal he cares more about his career than about his father. Or, alternatively, maybe Stevens is so committed to performing his role as butler that he suppresses his personal interests in order to better serve his employer. With Stevens it isn’t so simple. One reason is the way his relationship with his father is entwined with his life

---

<sup>274</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 42.

<sup>275</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 169.

<sup>276</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 169.

<sup>277</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 169.

path. Because his father was a major inspiration for his choice to become a butler and he continually refers to his father as an example of dignity, his commitment to be an excellent butler is tied up with his caring about his father.

The conversation between Stevens and his father on what turns out to be the last night of his father's life is both painful and comical:

“I hope I've been a good father to you.”

I [Stevens] laughed a little and said: “I'm so glad you're feeling better now.”

“I'm proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I haven't.”

“I'm afraid we're extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning.”<sup>278</sup>

For Stevens' father, however, that morning never comes and Stevens' final words to his father are to excuse himself so he can return to manage the “important” dinner below.<sup>279</sup>

The sadness of this scene is compounded by the fact that it is not an isolated incident.

Stevens' conception of Dignity<sub>1</sub> while working in a profession with few private moments causes him to ignore crucial life moments in order to effectively attend to his professional duties. Butlers were almost always “on the clock,” and Stevens would have seen visiting with his dying father or pursuing a relationship with Miss Kenton as weak-willed behavior. In this sense, Stevens was directing his life. But because of a tension between the practical identity that governs Stevens' life—as the constant and unfailing butler—and things Stevens deeply (if implicitly) values, his autonomy has a cost.

That cost seems to be in large part because there is a tension between the practical identity that governs Stevens' life—as the constant and unfailing butler—and certain things

---

<sup>278</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 97.

<sup>279</sup> Mr. Stevens repeatedly ignores the signs pointing to his father's impending death, instead focusing on serving the visiting dignitaries and preparing for a smooth conclusion to the conference. See, for example, Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 97, 104-110.

Stevens deeply (if implicitly) values. Motivation and self-knowledge are complex, so Stevens' claim that he didn't choose his life should not be the final word. It doesn't do justice to the fact that he seems to have chosen the butler's life as a way to make a "small contribution to the creation of a better world."<sup>280</sup> Much of the novel suggests that not only has Stevens chosen his life, but he has embraced it.

So how should we interpret Stevens' claim that he didn't choose his life? Maybe Stevens, looking back with regret on missed opportunities, is trying to avoid responsibility for his actions. He is trying to pass off the blame for his mistakes by claiming he didn't actually choose his life. Although psychologically plausible, I want to suggest that it is not merely regret and wishful thinking, but that there is an important sense in which Stevens did not choose his life.

Because Stevens' practical identity as butler crowded out other competing interests, many of his interests were subordinated. Of course, subordinating some interests in the pursuit of others is insufficient to claim that the lives we lead are not our own. We often subordinate certain desires to pursue goods we deem more worthwhile or important. A pressing deadline at work or an important family obligation gives me reason to subordinate my desire to watch a movie or basketball game. And if I put off my desire to watch sports, it seems odd to say that my choice to finish a paper or to help my son with a project was not

---

<sup>280</sup> A further question is how we should differentiate between cases in which agency is compromised and those in which we praise someone for being self-aware—aware of strengths and, perhaps more importantly, weaknesses—and choosing a life that best allows them to express their set of gifts. If Tim knows he manages time poorly and so puts himself in structured situations to help him more effectively pursue his ends, is that a problem, a success, or some combination? Is Tim's agency compromised? Or is his agency enhanced because, aware of certain abilities or weaknesses, he constructs a life allowing him to capitalize on what he does well or what he really cares about?

mine. It seems the opposite. Subordinating some interests in the pursuit of others more central to our lives seems the touchstone of autonomous action and a crucial part of a worthwhile life.

But Stevens' situation is complicated. His life has long been one of extreme deference, so his ability to freely choose his life in the sense required for authenticity or Dignity<sub>2</sub> has likely atrophied. Initially, he may have freely chosen to be a butler to improve the condition of the world. His actions would then have flowed from that practical identity originally grounded in his choice. But after repeatedly deferring to Darlington's judgment even when it conflicts with his own, Stevens' ability to freely choose his path might not be sufficiently robust to choose to leave the dinner with the dignitaries to attend to his father or to hear and respond to Miss Kenton's overtures for what they were.<sup>281</sup> If autonomy is to consistently inhabit one's practical identity and that identity is one of service and deference, unless one carefully works to avoid it, life as an autonomous butler can undermine the capacity to choose and direct the course of one's life.

It is not, then, that Stevens' was compelled to be a butler. But in a sort of structural analogy to the way Gary Watson describes addiction not as an irresistible desire but as an acquired appetite that impairs one's normative competence, Stevens' practical reasoning seems to be impaired by his role as butler.<sup>282</sup> Watson suggests that addictions can lead a certain substance or behavior to capture one's attention, "claim one's consciousness, direct

---

<sup>281</sup> In multiple scenes, Stevens claims it is not his place to *have an opinion* on a certain matter. This is different, of course, from the idea that it is not his place to *express his opinion* on a matter.

<sup>282</sup> Gary Watson, "Disordered Appetites: Addiction, Compulsion, and Dependence," in *Agency and Answerability*, 59-87. See, in particular, 71-73.

one's fantasies, break one's concentration on other things."<sup>283</sup> Similarly, because of his station as butler, Stevens finds it difficult to give the appropriate attention to his father or Miss Kenton. His position and its obligations generate normative noise in a way structurally similar to the addictive substances and behaviors on Watson's model. If this is right, it may not be a suppression of his personal interest so much as the fact that the way he has embraced the specific role of butler impacts his ability to value or to appreciate and act according to the way he values different things.<sup>284</sup>

And it may be in response to this sort of agential threat that Stevens' introduces Dignity<sub>2</sub> at the end of the novel, after recounting his visit with Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn). In a visit to Miss Kenton, now Mrs. Benn, she tells him that some of the unhappy moments of her married life have been when she has wondered what a married life with Stevens would have been like: "And you get to thinking about a different life, a better life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens."<sup>285</sup> Stevens writes,

"It took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed—why should I not admit it—at that moment, my heart

---

<sup>283</sup> Watson, "Disordered Appetites," 71-72.

<sup>284</sup> Stevens' situation is distinct from the more common conflict we face between two different projects. I value my writing and work as a teacher but also my relationships with my wife and children. When these conflict, I have to decide how to work out the tension. But this sort of conflict is analytically distinct from a conflict in which one of the projects involves subordination—say, as a butler or as a deferential housewife (for Thomas Hill). In these latter cases—particularly when the subordinate role is central to the agent's identity—in addition to the agential noise Watson discusses, it is not clear to what degree the agent can see clearly in the practical reasoning process.

<sup>285</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 239.

was breaking. Before long, however, I turned to her and said with a smile: ‘You’re very right, Mrs. Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock.’<sup>286</sup>

Although effectively maintaining his “professional dignity” now seems more appropriate than it did when (many years previously) he ignored then Miss Kenton’s obvious attempts to get a response when she tells him about her impending engagement to be married, one wonders if Stevens’ heart is only now able to break because his work situation has changed considerably. Stevens is now employed by Mr. Farraday, a wealthy American who tries (usually unsuccessfully) to engage him in friendly banter and encourages him to take some time visiting the English countryside. This passage suggests Stevens’ self-governance led to actions that undermined what he most valued and that he was importantly alienated from his life, compromising his authenticity.

To be clear, sorrow in a life or Stevens’ claim that his heart was breaking do not show that he was inauthentic. Someone could avoid heartache in an inauthentic life and an inauthentic life would very well be filled with heartache. So the content of the life can be a bit of a red herring. The problem isn’t the sorrow or the heartache. The problem is that Stevens’ patterns of deference and the resulting atrophy of his agential capacities seem to undermine his ability to choose (and thereby own) his life, whatever the life may be. Thus it is not the sorrow for missed opportunities but the worry that Stevens’ ability to choose his life was relevantly diminished that drives the concern about agency.

There is another concern about Mr. Stevens, one probably more often associated with authenticity, but which spills over into questions of autonomy if understood broadly as the ability to act according to one’s practical identity. One way of characterizing

---

<sup>286</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 239.

inauthenticity is in terms of “doing what one does” in a given situation without properly identifying with that action or with underlying reasons for the action. Even as a butler, Stevens seems excessively guided by “what one does” as a good butler. He has his butler heroes and seeks to follow their lead. As he puts it, “Not so long ago, if any such points of ambiguity arose regarding one’s duties, one had the comfort of knowing that before long some fellow whose professional opinion one respected would be accompanying his employer to the house, and there would be ample opportunity to discuss the matter.”<sup>287</sup> But aside from potential stiffness and a worrisome reliance on authority across spheres, Stevens seems to be a good butler for most of his career.

He runs into troubles, however, as the world changes. When Mr. Farraday, a wealthy American, buys the Darlington estate and employs Stevens, he is lost. Stevens is baffled by Farraday’s desire to engage in friendly banter with him. More precisely, he doesn’t understand how to banter and is unsure whether it is a practice befitting of a dignified butler. There is a sense in which his deference is conflicted between deference to his employer and deference to crumbling social norms. Instead of adjusting and attending to the needs of his new employer, he tries to determine what one should do as a butler in this new world. In a sense, then, Stevens struggles to adapt to his new professional situation for many of the same reasons that he struggled to choose his life. In both cases, his dedication to being a butler as he understood the role hurt his ability to live a life of his own. His ability to take ownership for his life in the sense required by authenticity was weakened. But as the social world changed, he was less able to adapt and respond to the changing actions recommended by the similar underlying reasons of attending to one’s employer’s wishes. He is less good as

---

<sup>287</sup> Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 17.



a butler because he consistently defers to others—doing what one does as a butler— instead of attending to the reasons he has as a butler.

Part of the sadness of *Remains of the Day* is the lost opportunities to properly end or develop meaningful relationships central to a rich human life. Stevens fails to properly say goodbye to his father and to pursue a potentially rich relationship with Miss Kenton largely due to his dedication as a butler. And if Stevens was a better butler for his unflagging professionalism, then his being a better butler leads him to miss out on things that matter, not just generally, but even to Mr. Stevens.

Because our lives are complex and multi-faceted, making a life better in one way can lead to regress in others.<sup>288</sup> If we take Stevens at his word that he sees his work as a butler as his way to contribute to creating a better world and has committed to it as his life, at that moment, he would be authentic. And to the extent that he acts in accordance with that life, he would be autonomous. But the passage where he claims his heart was breaking suggests that his self-governance led to actions that undermined what he most valued and that he was importantly alienated from his life, thereby compromising his authenticity. This is not to say we have some value or desire ranking system and, in cases of conflict, we act authentically when we act on those higher on the list. I'm wary of this picture because it suggests we are much more univocal about values than we often are. We can be drawn in different ways, genuinely valuing different things.

---

<sup>288</sup> The idea that finding fulfillment or excelling in one aspect of a life sometimes requires sacrifice in others has been the province of art and literature for a long time. The title character of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* finds herself torn between continuing in a loveless, but respectable and comfortable marriage for the sake of her son and pursuing a more exciting and perhaps more self-fulfilling relationship with Vronsky.

Like Mr. Stevens, we can find ourselves choosing between continuing on some path or changing for another, differently attractive path. In these circumstances, it can be hard to say what we should do (or what Stevens should have done). Because Stevens has committed to a particular life path and has built his life around it—coming to see the value of his life in terms of his excellence as a butler and the success of his employer—there is something to be said for acting consistently with that path. But there is also something to be said for being able to redirect the course of his life to better account for all that matters to him. And trouble is in the offing when you take on a role in which you start to lose your sense of what you want and believe.

We can now see more clearly not only how autonomy—effectively pursuing one’s practical identity—and authenticity—taking ownership for one’s life—are distinct notions, but they can impinge on each other, especially when one’s identity is such that fulfilling it well requires diminishing one’s freedom and/or leads to alienation from one’s broader life and cares. Holding other things fixed (such as his understanding of what professional excellence entails), as long as he is a butler, Stevens faces a dilemma. Either he slackens in his professional dignity (Dignity<sub>1</sub>) but allows himself to more effectively attend to other facets of his life. Or he maintains his professional dignity but remains alienated from himself, unable to properly align his life with what he values (Dignity<sub>2</sub>). Neither option is attractive.

In a sense this is a false dilemma. Stevens could develop a more expansive notion of what a good butler is, thereby allowing himself to better respond to the range of reasons from other (often suppressed) aspects of his practical identity, say, as son or potential lover. But given what we know about Stevens, from the first personal, agential perspective, he seems to face the following dilemma:

- If he slackens in his professional dignity (Dignity<sub>1</sub>) he can better attend to other facets of his life;
- If he maintains his professional dignity, he remains alienated from himself, unable to align his life with what he values (Dignity<sub>2</sub>).

Stevens has a reason to be who he is, to choose his current life and to pursue excellence as a butler. To the extent that he does so, he can achieve or maintain Dignity<sub>1</sub> or a certain autonomy in the face of the distractions or temptations to abandon it. More broadly speaking, Stevens has a reason to continue in his current (and admittedly narrow conception of his) practical identity as a butler. But if we consider things in terms of Dignity<sub>2</sub> and authenticity, he also has reason to change his life. By restructuring his life, Stevens would be more likely to achieve the integrity and/or wholeheartedness that could allow for greater coherence between his values and interests and his life.

But we better understand the richness and messiness of human life as we see the ways in which we can succeed and even simultaneously fail to live lives of our own.

Stevens has reasons to choose his current life and pursue excellence as a butler, being autonomous in the face of distractions or temptations. More broadly speaking, Stevens has a reason to continue in his current (and admittedly narrow conception of his) practical identity as a butler. But if we consider things in terms of Dignity<sub>2</sub> and authenticity, he also has reason to change his life to greater coherence between his values and interests and his life. By restructuring his life, Stevens would be more likely to achieve the integrity and/or wholeheartedness that could allow for greater coherence between his values and interests and his life.

But Mr. Stevens faces two problems. One is a problem of autonomy. The other is a problem of authenticity. Being autonomous as a butler as he understands it undermines his ability to act autonomously in other aspects of his practical identity, for example, as son or lover. But also being autonomous as a butler seems to undermine his ability to take responsibility and ownership in the sense required by authenticity. The very nature of being a butler (as Stevens conceives it) is one that encourages deference to one's employer or superiors. But that very deference can have significant impact on one's ability to take responsibility for one's practical identity.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of *Remains of the Day*, Stevens is returning to work for his new employer, a wealthy American. Because light-hearted conversation matters to his new boss, he is practicing his bantering skills. Stevens will likely return to the same level of butler expertise. But the thought that his life might not have been his choice could allow him to return to his life anew and make it his own, increasing his authenticity (or Dignity<sub>2</sub>). And if this happened, (other things being equal) his life would seem better. Not because he would be a better butler, but because the life would be both autonomous and authentic, more fully his own.

The contours of our lives are significantly shaped by others and one challenge is to make these lives our own. As is the case with Stevens, much in our lives is inherited. But unlike Stevens, probably with different life paths and (hopefully) more flexibility about how constantly to inhabit our professional roles, we can live lives more fully our own. Living a life of one's own does not always require a clean break with one's past. But it does involve coming to do things for one's own reasons and not only because someone else expects or desires it. Living lives that are not our own is surely not an agential sin on which butlers and

similarly servile agents have a monopoly. But because living in accordance with their practical roles can undermine living in accordance with what they care about, servile agents are particularly prone to this kind of shortcoming.

## Chapter Four: Self-Conception and Self-Deception

### I. Introduction

In the opening pages of *The Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche claims,

“We remain of necessity strangers to ourselves, we do not understand ourselves, we *must* mistake ourselves, for us the maxim reads to all eternity: ‘each is furthest from himself,’—with respect to ourselves we are not ‘knowers’ . . .”<sup>289</sup>

And in the final section of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes,

“I am for myself neither ‘jealous,’ nor ‘curious,’ nor ‘hunchbacked,’ nor ‘a civil servant.’ We are often amazed that the disabled person or the person suffering from a disease can bear the situation. But in their own eyes they are not disabled or dying. Until the moment he slips into a coma, the dying person is inhabited by a consciousness; he is everything that he sees . . . [Our particular characteristics] are the price we pay, without even thinking about it, for being in the world.”<sup>290</sup>

In this paper I bring together Nietzsche’s opening and Merleau-Ponty’s closing remarks to analyze the challenge that self-deception or self-ignorance seem to present to human agency, particularly to our ability to live autonomous and authentic lives.<sup>291</sup> But more than merely illustrating a challenge, these passages also suggest a way forward, one that explains human agency in a world in which we are shaped by various factors outside our control. Those factors can be broadly social—depending on our upbringing, families, cultures, and so forth. But those factors can also be those of “embodiment,” that is, relating to our physical and

---

<sup>289</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, 1.

<sup>290</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated by Donald Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 458-459.

<sup>291</sup> My goal in this chapter is not to give a careful scholarly interpretation of these passages in Nietzsche or Merleau-Ponty. Instead, I use these passages to examine the role that our self-conceptions should play in robust human agency.

physiological constitutions. My argument is that even though these factors pose problems for a certain conception of agency, they are also conditions that enable us to live the lives that we do. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, they are the “price we pay . . . for being in the world.”

In what follows, I first suggest the problem that poor self-knowledge—whether self-ignorance or self-deception—pose for two prominent accounts of human agency.<sup>292</sup> I go on to argue that a certain kind of self-ignorance in agency is pervasive, perhaps inevitable, given the perspectival structure of agency. I conclude by arguing not only that certain types of self-ignorance need not undermine robust human agency but also that the very factors that seem to undermine our agency are what enable it. That said, certain types or degrees of self-ignorance and self-deception can affect our ability to direct our actions. In particular, if we do not know what we are like, it can be difficult for *us* to change the people we are. That’s not to say we won’t change, but we may be less effective at reaching the goal we had in mind and it is less clear that we will be self-owning or self-directing in the senses required for authenticity or autonomy.

Self-conceptions play an important role in prominent theories of agency as varied as Harry Frankfurt’s and Christine Korsgaard’s. And it makes sense for self-conceptions to be important when assessing agency. If we want to know if we are in control of our actions, it seems plausible to compare our actions with the kinds of people we think we are. Our actions seem more truly ours when we do what we *really* want, which is sometimes construed as what we think we ought to do. When we act in ways that align with the sorts of people we

---

<sup>292</sup> Self-ignorance and self-deception are distinct, even though they can feed into each other. In order for me to deceive myself, it seems that I must have some knowledge in order to deceive myself about it.

are (or take ourselves to be), we seem more autonomous or more authentic. Because our practical identities can be connected with the way we view ourselves, it could seem that self-ignorance or self-deception would, on my view, undermine autonomy.

But even if we agree that self-conceptions play an important role in our agency, just how important are they? And what is the relationship between who we are and who we take ourselves to be? Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty suggest two reasons why we should be careful how much weight we give to self-conceptions. Nietzsche claims that we do not, even cannot, know ourselves. To the extent that we do not know ourselves, our self-conceptions would be inaccurate, and mistaken self-conceptions seem like problematic benchmarks for assessing agency, whether our own or someone else's. In a different vein, Merleau-Ponty suggests that some of our key characteristics, those things that make us who we are, are beyond our reach. They are the lenses through which we view the world. But it is the world we see, not the lens. Even if we consciously identify with the characteristics or roles that influence how we value and approach the world, it is a further point to show how consciously identifying with a characteristic or role affects our agency. Or, on the flip side, it is unclear to what extent my consciously not identifying some personal characteristic or role should affect where I stand as an agent. However much Larry sees himself as punctual and reliable (and consciously brushes off suggestions to the contrary), his tendency to arrive slightly late and to fail to follow through on commitments makes it hard for his conscious identification to hold water.

As I understand practical identities, there is space for autonomous action even when one does not have the most accurate self-conception. To be sure, self-ignorance and self-deception affect our lives. But we can be self-governing, autonomous individuals even as we



are mistaken about the types of people we are. Sometimes an agent could be mistaken or self-deceived about where he actually stands. He could think he is committed to his marriage or his diet, for example, but when the temptation comes, he succumbs. Now I grant that there are instances of weak-willed action. But sometimes apparently weak-willed or out-of-character action is neither. In spite of his self-conception as “committed,” sometimes the person who cheats on his diet or spouse is less committed than he thinks. When we construe the self of “self-governance” too narrowly, we can mischaracterize actions as weak-willed or non-autonomous when they are very much our own.

In Section II, I outline the role that self-conceptions play in Harry Frankfurt’s and Christine Korsgaard’s accounts of agency. Even though their accounts of agency differ in important ways, for both Frankfurt and Korsgaard, one’s self-conception is important in determining whether a behavior is an exercise of agency and, if it is, whether it should be considered free or unfree, autonomous or non-autonomous, and so forth. In Section III, we look at the problems that self-ignorance and self-deception pose for Frankfurt and Korsgaard. In the Introduction to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Oliver Sacks says that for individuals with certain right-hemisphere syndromes, “it is not only difficult [but] impossible” for them to know their own problems.<sup>293</sup> I will suggest that, to some degree, this difficulty extends beyond the pathological. Even when we are psychologically and emotionally well, it can be very difficult for us to know ourselves in a certain way. In the background here, we have people like Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>294</sup> I

---

<sup>293</sup> Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Touchstone, 2006), 5.

<sup>294</sup> In recent work, John Doris and Quassim Cassam also explore the way that our lack of self-knowledge or ignorance affects our ability to exercise our allegedly distinctive human

argue that a certain kind of self-ignorance in agency is pervasive, perhaps inevitable, given the way agency works. Rather than taking this to show that agency is unattainable, however, I argue that many forms of agency are not undermined by self-ignorance and (potentially) self-deception. This position depends on the (sometimes) overlooked distinction between our practical identities and our self-conceptions. To some degree, our practical identities and our self-conceptions can come together (though I think it is not as straightforward process). But our self-conceptions can also depart—sometimes dramatically—from the practical identities that shape our agential landscape.

In Section IV, I argue that the very things that we often cannot get a clear view on, which make up what I have called our “existential situatedness,” are often what enable our agency, even if they also create problems for our self-knowledge. In the end, I suggest that there is a higher standard of self-knowledge required for authenticity than for autonomy. One can fail to take ownership for one’s life while still being able to direct the course of the life in the sense required by autonomy. On this way of thinking, authenticity can be threatened if self-ignorance and/or self-deception are sufficiently bad, even if one is still self-governing or self-directing in the sense required by autonomy.<sup>295</sup>

## **II. Self-Conceptions in Frankfurt and Korsgaard**

### **II.a. Frankfurt**

Although the overall focus of Harry Frankfurt’s work arguably shifts or expands between his early and late work, the way we view ourselves consistently plays an important role in the

---

agency. John Doris, *Talking to Ourselves* and Quassim Cassam, *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>295</sup> On this point, I differ from Quassim Cassam, who argues that authenticity is not undermined by self-ignorance.

status of our actions. In early work like “Identification and Externality,” Harry Frankfurt focuses largely on whether and how we are morally responsible for our actions.<sup>296</sup>

One of his goals is to establish criteria by which we can distinguish actions from mere happenings. Initially, Frankfurt describes actions as those “in which the higher faculties of human beings come into play” and mere happenings as “movements of a person’s body . . . that he himself does not make.”<sup>297</sup> Drawing on Aristotle’s conception of a moving principle, he suggests that we are active when the moving principle is inside (or internal to) us and we are passive when the moving principle is outside (or external to) us. We will discuss in more detail below an example Frankfurt uses of a passion and resulting actions that are external to the agent.<sup>298</sup> But one of the driving forces in the example is the fact that after the individual acts on the passion, he says, “I wasn’t myself” (63). The agent’s own experience and testimony seem to carry a fair amount of weight.

In later work like *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting it Right*, Frankfurt retains an interest in moral responsibility—what is required to be morally responsible for our actions or to be absolved of responsibility—even if caring and love play an even more central role. But as caring and love come to occupy a more central place, the way we see ourselves can also surreptitiously continue to play a crucial role.

He discusses obsessional thoughts, senseless and reckless impulses, and hot surges of anarchic emotion that seem unwarranted given the circumstances. In these instances, Frankfurt claims, we “do not participate actively in what goes on in us” and are instead “just

---

<sup>296</sup> Harry Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality.”

<sup>297</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 58.

<sup>298</sup> I say “actions” here, but on Frankfurt’s account, it is unclear these are genuine actions.

bystanders.”<sup>299</sup> He goes on, “These are things that *happen* to us. When they occur, we are not participating agents who are expressing what we really think or want or feel.”<sup>300</sup> Some of these mental happenings are benign. Certain daydreams or random associations fall short of robust mental agency even when I do not resist their occurrence. But, he thinks, sometimes the agent finds things in himself that are “dangerously antithetical to his intentions and to his conception of himself.”<sup>301</sup> Frankfurt uses the language of immune systems and legal/police action to describe the way we can respond to these unwanted psychic intruders that can undermine our self-conceptions. Through “a kind of psychic immune response” we can dissociate ourselves from these unwanted passions—turning them into outlaws—as we externalize them by denying them “entitlement to supply us with motives or with reasons.”<sup>302</sup> Through this process of dissociation and externalization, we free ourselves from responsibility for their “ongoing presence in our psychic history, or for any conduct to which that may lead.”<sup>303</sup>

But what makes these passions (and the subsequent actions they can lead to) external in the first place? Is it because the passion comes over the individual like a wave, unbidden and genuinely outside the individual’s control? Or are the desires external because they are unwanted in a slightly different sense. A desire can also be unwanted because it is something that (on some level) we don’t want to have or about which we have some misgivings. For

---

<sup>299</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 8-9.

<sup>300</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 9, original emphasis.

<sup>301</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 10.

<sup>302</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 10.

<sup>303</sup> Frankfurt, *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, 7.

example, part of me wants the second piece of chocolate cake or wants to say the spiteful thing to a colleague, but I might wish that I didn't have those desires. Concrete examples can be very useful philosophically and Frankfurt's are no exception. His examples of passions and, by extension, actions that are not fully the agent's own play an important role in his explanation of externality. But as with many examples, they are underdescribed and open to multiple interpretations. This is a problem because understanding what makes something external is crucial to understanding Frankfurt's views on agency—on freedom, responsibility, and the like.

Let's examine one of Frankfurt's examples to better understand why he thinks one's self-conception is crucial in determining whether we can ascribe robust agency to an individual and why this centrality can be problematic, in both his early and late work. In "Identification and Externality," he uses a striking example to show how some emotions and passions (and even actions) can seem external or foreign to us:

"In the course of an animated but amiable enough conversation, a man's temper suddenly rushes up in him out of control. Although nothing has happened that makes his behavior readily intelligible, he begins to fling dishes, books, and crudely abusive language at his companion. Then his tantrum subsides and he says, 'I have no idea what triggered that bizarre spasm of emotion. The feelings just came out of me from out of nowhere, and I couldn't help it. I wasn't myself. Please don't hold it against me'."<sup>304</sup>

Frankfurt mentions several ways we can understand this situation. The first is that "these disclaimers may be . . . shabbily insincere devices for obtaining unmerited indulgence."

Claiming not to be ourselves when we do things that could hurt others and negatively affect our relationships and standing with them could be *merely* self-serving and prudential. Such

---

<sup>304</sup> Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," 63.

cases would lack remorse for one's actions and the desire to search out the action's underlying cause or to change one's future behavior. The second possibility Frankfurt considers is that these disclaimers "may be nothing more than emphatic expressions of regret." We could ask for someone not to hold our bad actions against us when we wish we hadn't done what we did. It could be an attempt to distance ourselves from our actions, or to separate what we have done in the past from the sorts of people we want to be going forward. Finally, Frankfurt suggests, "it is also possible that they are genuinely descriptive."<sup>305</sup> Given that the claims Frankfurt considers as potentially "genuinely descriptive" are first-personal, I think this must mean something like the agent was surprised by his actions and saw them as departing from the sort of person he is (or takes himself to be). The "bizarre spasm of emotion" language could suggest something even stronger—perhaps he found his emotions and body moving entirely out of his control—but for now I use a more modest interpretation of the third possibility.

Frankfurt seems to think that these three options are mutually exclusive. But I think they are compatible and sometimes overlapping. The disclaimers could be genuinely descriptive, for example—the individual's actions depart from the way he conceives of himself—while also being devices for "obtaining unmerited indulgence." Further, it is unclear how much weight one's self-conception should carry in understanding whether an emotion or action is internal or external to the agent. To the degree that an individual's self-conception is self-ignorant and/or self-deceived, the agent may experience emotions and actions as external or foreign when they are actually consistent with him as an agent.

---

<sup>305</sup> Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," 63.

But, assuming that these are distinct options and focusing on the third—that is, those that are genuinely descriptive—Harry Frankfurt then rejects Terence Penelhum’s view that even desires that we would prefer not to have still qualify as ours just as much as those desires we identify with. Penelhum thinks that when we claim that some desires are external to ourselves, we are guilty of “moral trickery” and “falsehood.”<sup>306</sup> Penelhum’s argument, as Frankfurt describes it, hinges on the claim that “every desire must, after all, belong to *someone*, and a desire with which a person does not identify himself clearly does not belong to anyone else.”<sup>307</sup> So, Penelhum argues, even if the person does not identify with the desire, it is still his (because it must be someone’s). I agree with Frankfurt that Penelhum’s argument is problematic and there is something to Frankfurt’s suggestion that identifying with a desire can change its status in an important way. It is less clear, however, that identifying with a desire or actively not identifying with a desire is what differentiates between internal and external desires. In short, although I agree with Frankfurt that Penelhum’s “way with the matter” seems “too hasty,” I think Frankfurt has his own problems with haste.<sup>308</sup> As he pushes back against Penelhum’s claim that all desires—wanted and unwanted—belong to the agent, Frankfurt veers too quickly in the other direction, too readily granting authority to a person’s claim that a passion is external to them.

Frankfurt is aware that his position seems to open the floodgates:

---

<sup>306</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 60; Terence Penelhum, “The Importance of Self-Identity,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68(20), 670.

<sup>307</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 60. Penelhum, “Importance of Self-Identity,” 674.

<sup>308</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 60.

“No doubt we will be providing people with opportunities for moral evasion, as Penelhum suggests, if we were to allow that it may be legitimate for someone to disclaim certain of his passions as external. For a person may of course be acting in bad faith when he denies that a passion he finds in himself is unequivocally to be attributed to him.”<sup>309</sup>

If we too readily take as “genuinely descriptive” claims of externality, Frankfurt suggests, we risk conflating three distinct cases: the shabbily insincere attempts at unmerited indulgence, the emphatic expressions of regret, and the mismatch between self-conception and actions. We could let more agents off the agential hook than we should. But Frankfurt thinks this isn’t a unique problem or one that is worth trying to solve. He writes:

“[W]e routinely make room for similar evasiveness and inauthenticity already, without thinking that it is a mistake for us to do so, in our acceptance of the practice of disclaiming certain bodily movements as external. A person may dishonestly and successfully seek to escape an unfavorable judgment to which he would otherwise be subject, after all, by denying that a certain movement of his body was one that he made, and by professing that the moving principle of the physical event in question was actually quite external to him. Moreover it may be as hopelessly difficult to uncover the self-deception or the lie when someone pretends that a movement of his body is one that he did not make, as it often is to discover a person’s insincerity when he maintains that a passion he experiences is not to be attributed to him.”<sup>310</sup>

Presumably Frankfurt has in mind things like muscle spasms, sneezes, or times when something or someone impels me to move my body in a certain way without my willing it. He is right that we want to be able to distinguish the times when *I* kick something from those when my knee reflexes cause my foot to hit the same object. And Frankfurt is also right that it may be “hopelessly difficult” to ascertain when people are being truthful (to us or to themselves) when claiming that a passion or movement is not their own. But it being

---

<sup>309</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 62.

<sup>310</sup> Frankfurt, “Identification and Externality,” 62.



difficult to judge truthfulness or sincerity is a different matter from whether one's experience of a passion is the criterion by which we should determine internality or externality. The first is an epistemological matter; the second is a matter of agency (at the intersection of philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and ethics). It is (at least) difficult to determine honesty, sincerity, and accuracy when someone claims that a passion or a movement is external. And so it can be hard to assess whether they should be absolved of their responsibility for the passion or movement. This difficulty can make it tempting to punt on the question or to too readily grant agential amnesty.

But it is precisely because this case (and others like it) is complicated that it deserves more fine-grained distinctions and we should exercise a bit more caution before we take the agent at his word. If Eric Schwitzgebel is right that our self-knowledge is (potentially and perhaps inevitably) rather poor when it comes to our central values and general background assumptions, Frankfurt's individual's disclaimers can be sincere and genuine even if the passion is in fact very much his own.<sup>311</sup> The fact that he thinks "he wasn't himself" and believes "he couldn't help it" is not enough. When one's self-conception diverges from one's actions, it is not obvious what should be privileged in determining where the agent stands. At the very least, it is unclear that experiencing a passion, emotion, or action as external is sufficient for it to actually be external.

Ultimately, I think externalization comes too easily for Frankfurt. To be fair, as with any philosopher, there are challenges of interpretation. It is not always clear how we should interpret Frankfurt's examples. And sometimes he offers disclaimers on his initial

---

<sup>311</sup> In Section IV, we will discuss in more detail why we should be cautious how much weight we give to self-knowledge or, perhaps more precisely, to our beliefs about ourselves.

explanation without always offering a satisfying explanation. With the tantrum case, for example, he acknowledges the possibility of “bad faith” and the epistemological difficulty in determining sincerity or authenticity in others.<sup>312</sup> But then he too easily lets the fact that it is hard to interpret an agent’s claims to externality dissuade him from more adequately considering challenges like bad faith, self-deception, and self-ignorance.

In a different vein, as Frankfurt describes the case, it seems fairly easy to deny unwanted passions entitlement in my practical deliberations. But what exactly is involved when I deny a passion or a reason entitlement and how easy is it to do so? If I experience a passion that (from a moral/ethical perspective) I don’t think I should act on, is that enough to deny it entitlement? If so, then dissociation comes too cheaply. It opens the door for relatively common cases of self-ignorance to undermine agency. For example, if I think I am a fair and decent person but consistently act in ways that reveal problematic biases and inclinations, it seems misguided to let my mistaken self-conception undermine certain attributions of agency. At least it deserves more careful consideration to determine exactly how my agency is affected. In such cases, it seems that I am acting in quite a robust sense. I am simply mistaken about the sort of person I am. To be sure, there are times in which a passion could be genuinely external to an agent. But I think Frankfurt fails to distinguish cases of genuine externality from more pervasive cases that can arise from fairly common levels of self-ignorance. This failure is exacerbated because he seems to grant significant authority to one’s self-conception, not only in more potentially heady ideals like autonomy

---

<sup>312</sup> But as I hope to show, presumably some of the same difficulties would apply to our knowledge of ourselves.

or authenticity, but even in the more common but crucial standard of agency required for moral responsibility.

Part of this could be a failure to carefully distinguish between what Agnieszka Jaworska has called objective identification and subjective identification<sup>313</sup> With this distinction in place, we can see how an agent *could be identified with* an attitude or action (objective identification) *without identifying with* an attitude or action (subjective identification). Larry could be ontologically identified with his anger if it plays a central role in his character even if he does not subjectively identify with it because he sees its manifestations as emotional blips in his life. At least as presented in the example in “Identification and Externality,” Frankfurt talks of the relevant identification much in the way Jaworska discusses subjective identification. On his account, it seems that one would tend to experience emotions and actions as external to the degree that they depart from one’s self-conception. It seems that I seek to be excused for “not being myself” when I act in ways that I do not identify with. But that is a matter of subjective identification. And although objective identification seems a better criterion in such matters, to the extent that one’s self-conception figures in the way it seems to for Frankfurt, it seems that subjective identification is what will be playing the role. In Section III, I will discuss in more detail the problem that self-ignorance can pose for accounts of agency that rely heavily on one’s self-conception. But first let’s consider the role that one’s self-conception plays in Christine Korsgaard’s account of agency.

---

<sup>313</sup> Remember that ontological identification “pick[s] out attitudes that properly belong to the agent from a sea of happenings in the agent’s psychic life,” while Subjective identification focuses “on how the agent perceives aspects of his psychology and whether he regards them as his own.” Jaworska, “Caring and Internality,” 531.

## II.b. Korsgaard

In her work, Christine Korsgaard has consistently emphasized the relationship between agency and identity. And the way we conceive of ourselves as agents is crucial throughout. One earlier example is “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency,” in which she argues that it is important that we not reduce agency to a mere form of experience, “because our conception of what a person is depends in a deep way on our conception of ourselves as agents.”<sup>314</sup> The way we conceive of ourselves as agents plays an important role in her account of *The Sources of Normativity*. And even the titles of her more recent books—*The Constitution of Agency* and *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*—reveal a continued interest. I will start by sketching Korsgaard’s view in *Sources of Normativity* about the role that one’s self-conception plays in agency. This connects to earlier discussions about the relationship between autonomy and practical identity. I hope to make it clearer why I think Korsgaard’s interpretation of practical identities is problematic. I do, however, think Korsgaard herself already suggests the pieces of a more adequate account, even if she doesn’t develop them in a way that allows her view to better account for challenges posed by self-deception and self-ignorance.

There is a long tradition in Western philosophy that believes human reflectiveness or self-consciousness is distinctive of human agency. In *Sources of Normativity*, Christine Korsgaard claims that the human mind is essentially reflective. Unlike lower animals who are not conscious of the way they engage with the world, we can “turn our attention on to our

---

<sup>314</sup> “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit,” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 364. The essay was originally published in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18(2): 101-132.

perceptions and desires themselves.”<sup>315</sup> This enables us “to distance ourselves from [our mental activities]” and “to call them into question.”<sup>316</sup> The problem of the normative, as Korsgaard calls it, is the question of whether and how we should act on some desire or belief. Even if we go on to act on those perceptions, desires, or beliefs, we want reasons for our actions because we want our desires and beliefs to be able to withstand reflective scrutiny. Our ability to reflect on our desires and beliefs thus changes our agential landscape in important ways.

But on what basis do we determine whether a particular desire or belief qualifies as a good reason to do something? Korsgaard offers two ultimately related accounts for how our desires and inclinations become ours in a richer sense, for how we can put our stamp of approval or endorse some of these desires or beliefs over others. The first (clearly Kantian) account begins with the idea that when we are discussing questions of freedom and endorsement, we should focus on the deliberative perspective. We find ourselves with desires, and we must decide which to act on and which to reject. Kant thinks this is a matter of freedom. We act freely—having a free will—when we act on a principle or a law that comes from ourselves. To be brief, Kant argues that we act freely, making potentially alien desires and inclinations our own, when we act according to the categorical imperative (as represented by the formula of universal law).

The second account, which Korsgaard specifically offers as a solution to the problem created by reflectiveness and freedom, depends on the fact that our reflective nature forces us to have a conception of ourselves, specifically, a conception of our practical identity.

---

<sup>315</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 93.

<sup>316</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 93

Again, for Korsgaard, a conception of one's practical identity is "a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking."<sup>317</sup> Because life tends to be multi-faceted, a practical identity tends to be a complex thing. It includes things like being a "human being, a woman or man, an adherent of a certain religion, a member of an ethnic group, a member of a certain profession, someone's lover or friend, and so on."<sup>318</sup> These different "identities give rise to reasons and obligations"<sup>319</sup> On Korsgaard's account, "reasons express your identity, your nature; your obligations spring from what that identity forbids."<sup>320</sup> Sometimes reasons from different aspects of our identities are related, but not always. Some identities and reasons stemming from them can support each other. As a father, I have a reason to help my children flourish. This can include things like providing food and shelter. But it also involves thing like helping them develop emotionally, morally, and intellectually. My profession can help take care of some of my children's basic needs. And so I can have both professional and parental reasons to be a good teacher and scholar. But even potentially supporting identities can sometimes undermine or conflict with each other. I could have a conference out of town the same day my child has a birthday, or sporting event, or just when he or she needs to talk in person.

Korsgaard thinks some aspects of our practical identities are more important to us than others. Those that are most important, she thinks, give rise to "unconditional obligations." They are unconditional because if we violate them, we "lose our integrity [our

---

<sup>317</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>318</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>319</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

<sup>320</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 101.

unity] and so our identity [because being a unified individual depends on living up to our own standards.”<sup>321</sup> This loss of integrity and identity amounts to “no longer [being] who you are,” Korsgaard says strongly. This sort of loss of identity happens when we can no longer think of ourselves under the descriptions under which we value ourselves and find our lives to be worth living or actions to be worth undertaking.<sup>322</sup> To retain our integrity and identity, Korsgaard thinks we must be autonomous, which for her amounts to governing ourselves according to what we “think it would be a good idea to do.”<sup>323</sup>

Korsgaard summarizes her argument for why there is obligation in the following way:

“The reflective structure of human consciousness sets us a problem. Reflective distance from our impulses makes it both possible and necessary to decide which ones we will act on: it forces us to have reasons. At the same time, and relatedly, it forces us to have a conception of our own identity, a conception which identifies us with the source of reasons. In this way, it makes us laws to ourselves. When an impulse—say a desire—presents itself to us, we ask whether it could be a reason. We answer that question by seeing whether the maxim of acting on it can be willed as a law by a being with the identity in question.”<sup>324</sup>

So far, this has only established that there are obligations, but it has not yet established that there are moral obligations. To do so, she admits that she needs to show that there are particular ways that we “must think of our identities.”<sup>325</sup> Our reasons and obligations and, by

---

<sup>321</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 102.

<sup>322</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 102.

<sup>323</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 107.

<sup>324</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 113.

<sup>325</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 113.

extension, our agency, are tied up with the way we think of our identities.<sup>326</sup> But because different laws hold for “wantons, egoists, lovers, and Citizens of the Kingdom of Ends,” she wants to avoid a deep relativism about morality by showing that there are some aspects of our identities that we cannot shed.<sup>327</sup> Because our focus is not so much on morality, we will not go into as much detail in her argument for why the demands of morality are inescapable.

But I want to highlight an aspect in Korsgaard’s account that makes her account vulnerable to the challenges of self-ignorance and self-deception. In one passage, Korsgaard describes autonomy as “commanding yourself to do what you think it would be a good idea to do, but that in turn depends on who you think you are.”<sup>328</sup> But a few pages earlier, she writes, “It is the conceptions of ourselves that are most important to us that give rise to unconditional obligations. For to violate them is to lose your integrity and so your identity, and to no longer be who you are.”<sup>329</sup> In these two passages, Korsgaard seems to conflate two, conceptually distinct things: (1) who I am and (2) who I think I am. Those who are optimistic could think my self-conception—who I think I am—perhaps inevitably lines up with who I am. But I think there’s reason to doubt this.

There are various ways to argue that this alignment is not inevitable. I think there are several (at least potentially) conceptually distinct notions in play: self-conception, practical identity, and “who one is.” For Korsgaard, one’s self-conception is identical to one’s practical identity, but I think it is unclear that we should equate one’s self-conception and

---

<sup>326</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 113.

<sup>327</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 113.

<sup>328</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 107.

<sup>329</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 102.



one's practical identity. As a rule, the two are closely intertwined, but they are distinct and we can see them come apart in cases of self-ignorance and self-deception. And the greater the self-ignorance or self-deception is, the greater the potential gap between one's self-conception and one's practical identity. Because my conception of practical identity is in many ways Korsgaardian, let me say something about how I make this distinction. The point of divergence is in what is involved in a practical identity. I think a practical identity can diverge from one's self-conception when one values oneself under a description without being fully aware that they do. Let me explain. One values oneself by seeing oneself as a reason for action. And to the extent that one's self-conception is inaccurate, one can see reason to engage with the world in a way fitting for a certain identity even if one does not see oneself in that way. For example, I can think of myself as a committed husband or father. But to the extent that I consistently find reasons to stay away from home or to avoid marital or parental commitments and obligations, acting on reasons coming from my roles at work or as a friend, my practical identity comes apart from my self-conception. My practical identity is determined by the reasons that stand out to me as salient in my practical reasoning; my self-conception is a matter of how I view myself.

Korsgaard argues that our particular practical identities are ultimately grounded in our inescapable practical identities as human beings. That is, even though "most of the self-conceptions which govern us are contingent," it is not contingent that we are governed by some conception of a practical identity.<sup>330</sup> She goes on,

"Unless you are committed to some conception of your practical identity, you will lose your grip on yourself as having any reason to do one thing

---

<sup>330</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 120.

rather than another—and with it, your grip on yourself as having any reason to live and act at all. But this reason for conforming to your particular practical identities is not a reason that springs from one of those particular practical identities. It is a reason that springs from your humanity itself, from your identity simply as a human being, a reflective animal who needs reasons to act and live. And so it is a reason you have only if you treat your humanity as a practical, normative, form of identity, that is, if you value yourself as a human being.”<sup>331</sup>

It is our inescapable conception of ourselves as humans—as reflective animals who need reasons to act and live—that give us reason to act in accordance with our more particular and contingent practical identities.

But if it is a matter of self-conception that determines whether an action is ours or not, then it is unclear that aspects of our identity like “human” would factor more prominently than those that make us the unique people we are. Those contingent and particular practical identities that give much of the texture to our lives typically stem from our familial relationships, our vocations or passions, causes with which we strongly identify, and or religious and/or ethical commitments. When I think of what I ought to do, there is a sense in which I am a husband, father, or child, a teacher or scholar, and a friend before I am a human. Of course, in some sense, these more particular aspects of my identity depend on my being a human (or a person or being of some sort). But if it is an actually occurrent self-conception, then it is unclear that the more practical identity of “human” is the right way to go. It seems that particular aspects of our practical identities figure more prominently in our practical reasoning than things like “human.”

If our most central aspects are those that cannot be shed easily, then it is unclear why things like “human” should be central. As a rule, it seems that roles like teacher, parent,

---

<sup>331</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 121.

child, neighbor, and lover are more likely to guide our practical deliberations. Especially since Korsgaard has already created a space in which we could cease to be the people that we are if we lose our integrity and fall short of our obligations. If individuals can cease to be the same person when they fail to live up to their commitments, then aspects we use to define ourselves can be very central indeed. To be sure, being human is crucial. But if I shed certain aspects of my identity, it could become unclear that I am still the same person. Bernard Williams suggests, for example, that if certain core or “ground” projects are frustrated, then one might feel “that he might as well have died.”<sup>332</sup> To translate into Korsgaard, if I consistently fail to live up to some of my commitments, I can cease to be who I am (or was).<sup>333</sup>

But what should we say in cases in which the agent is self-ignorant? In the case of the self-ignorant “committed” spouse or parent, we could parse things in the following way. He conceives of himself as a committed husband and father, and these play a central role in how he (thinks he) organizes his life. But as he goes about his day, the reasons that stand out to him are those that would cause him to fall short of spousal and parental obligations. Even when his child has asked him in advance to make it to his school play and he has promised he would come, he readily accepts an invitation to stay late at the office (to chat about the

---

<sup>332</sup> Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 13. In “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” Williams explicitly considers whether an immortal life could be meaningful. One consideration is how much one’s character can change while still remaining the same person. After 342 years, Elena Makropulos’s life has “come to a state of boredom, indifference, and coldness.” Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality,” in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82. In order to remain the same person, she must retain roughly the same character. And after 342 years, she has exhausted the possibilities available to a woman with that character.

<sup>333</sup> Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 102.

firm's fantasy football league) or to accompany a group of co-workers to a social dinner. His professed self-conception would say that he should keep his word to his child and go to the play. But the practical identity that actually polarizes his world gives him ready reasons to avoid family and home. In such a case, it is unclear that the way he conceives of himself should be given agential authority. Just as we should think twice before we take the Frankfurt's temper-tantrum agent at his word, we should wonder if our own conscious conceptions of our practical identities accurately track our perceptions of reasons. At least some of the time, we are not entirely aware of the practical identities that guide our actions. And they can depart, sometimes dramatically, from how we conceive of ourselves.

### **III. Ignorant Agency: Practical Identity and Self-Conception**

In the prologue to Elizabeth Strout's *The Burgess Boys*, the narrator tells her mother about her hesitancy to write a story about the Burgess kids:

“‘People will say it’s not nice to write about people I know.’  
My mother was tired that night. She yawned. ‘Well, you don’t know them,’  
she said. ‘Nobody ever knows anyone.’”<sup>334</sup>

To the extent that the mother is right that “nobody ever knows anyone,” it seems also true about our ability to know ourselves. There is some obvious sense in which we have a different sort of access to our own desires, beliefs, and the like. Sometimes we take this different access to involve a sort of transparency. That is, we often think that we can grasp our own desires or beliefs in a unique and, often, uniquely privileged way. Put very crudely: Who can be a better judge of how I feel or what I believe than I can? It seems to be a misguided and losing battle to claim otherwise.

---

<sup>334</sup> Elizabeth Strout, *The Burgess Boys* (New York: Random House, 2013), 8.

But there are two reasons to resist this view. The first is that it can be hard to discern our own beliefs, motives, desires, and values. The second is that whatever unique access we have to our beliefs, desires, motives, and the like, it is not the kind that readily allows for accurate introspection. With regard to the difficulty in discerning our beliefs, motives, and desires, it is nothing new to say that honest self-assessment is a challenge. When (on some level) we think a desire or belief is problematic, it can take more evidence to convince us we desire or believe it. The implicit racist or sexist may ignore or explain away indications that he or she is racist or sexist. The sexist teacher, for example, may not realize that it takes more and more intelligent comments from women students for him to perceive them as promising scholars. But even with positive character traits or desires, we might be slow to acknowledge or embrace that we fit the bill. It can be hard to tell, for example, if I treat a person kindly because I am morally decent or because the person I help could do me a favor in return or because my actions could impress someone else. Admittedly, motivations and justifications are often complex, so we can do things for more than one reason. And we may not be sure what desire was actually guiding the action until well after the fact, if that insight ever comes.<sup>335</sup> We can come to realize that a certain desire was motivating us, even though we were on some level unaware of it. One could ask, though, whether a desire could really be ours if we are unaware of it (even if it is motivationally effective). This brings us to the second reason to resist the idea of self-transparency.

---

<sup>335</sup> A stronger view is that we may never be sure of what our actual motivations are. It could be that the very nature of motivation is such that in trying to pin them down, we distort them.

The second reason grants that we have unique access to our beliefs, desires, and values, but it questions if the access we have gives us the epistemic privilege we tend to think. We are very close to our beliefs, desires, and values, because it is through them that we have a certain kind of access to the world. For example, it is on the (often tacit) basis of certain values that some things appear worthwhile and others as a waste of time. We uniquely experience them, because they are something like the “lens” through which we view the world. But even though these things are very close to us, their proximity does not always grant us privileged epistemic access.<sup>336</sup> So Frankfurt may be right that statements like “I wasn’t myself” are “genuinely descriptive” of the agent’s experience of the flood of emotion and the ensuing actions brought on by his temper. He could have seen the emotions and their impact as foreign to how he conceived of himself. But even if he experienced them as foreign in this way, the statements could also be “emphatic expressions of regret” and even “devices for obtaining unmerited indulgence.” Our self-conceptions can depart, sometimes radically, from our character, emotions, desires, and beliefs that shape and color our world, from the things that make some considerations stand out and others fade into the background. The tennis player John McEnroe might have thought he was a pretty even-keel individual, but his consistently losing his temper and, borrowing from Frankfurt’s example, “fling[ing] dishes, books, and crudely abusive language at his companion” suggests

---

<sup>336</sup> If this is right, it’s possible that others could sometimes better discern what we want than we can. It could be that in order to better know ourselves, we need to learn to occupy the perspectives of others. And to better understand what it is like to be someone else, we need to understand the first-person agential perspective. Both perspectives are important for understanding agency.

otherwise.<sup>337</sup> He could very well experience it as not being himself and coming out of nowhere. But one's self-conception should only carry so much weight, or so I argue.

As Oliver Sacks notes, for individuals with certain right-hemisphere syndromes, "it is not only difficult [but] impossible" for them to know their own problems.<sup>338</sup> But the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, affects even the emotionally/psychologically well. Given the way agency works, a certain kind of self-ignorance—if we want to call it that—is pervasive, perhaps inevitable. But this need not make agency unattainable. The difficulty of knowing ourselves can be explained by the perspectival or situated nature of agency. But I think that the (sometimes) overlooked distinction between our practical identities and our self-conceptions can help explain how we can still be autonomous even if we are self-ignorant. Self-conceptions and practical identities can come together. But our self-conceptions can differ—sometimes dramatically—from the broader practical identities that shape our agential landscape. Our practical identities typically include the roles, character traits, values, and beliefs that we would reflectively assent to—this conjunct is closer to our self-conceptions—but they also can include the beliefs, desires, motives, and commitments that in different (sometimes semi-subterranean) but consistent ways shape the way we view the world and guide our actions.

That may seem to cast a wide net, but there are some things we do that fall out of the purview of our practical identity. A practical identity is something that seems to give rise to an obligation, even if we are not entirely aware of or do not reflectively feel the force of the obligation. We can act on obligations (in a broad sense of "obligation") that we might not

---

<sup>337</sup> Frankfurt, "Identification and Externality," 63.

<sup>338</sup> Sacks, *Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, 5.

reflectively assent to. These obligations can be moral, but they need not.<sup>339</sup> As a father, I feel an obligation to make it to my child's basketball game (especially if I am the coach). When I go to the basketball game, I am acting on reasons I have in light of my practical identity. But again, not all of my actions are a result of my practical identity. I could stop to get a Coke on my way home from work, but I would not think that I have any obligation or some deep reason stemming from who I am. For some, of course, having a certain kind of drink on hand could become part of one's practical identity, depending on the way it connects to other aspects of my life and on whether or not I would take myself to have a reason to support the practice. Our habits and practice play an important role in shaping obligations broadly construed, so habitual and consistent actions are important in understanding autonomy. But not all mere actions—even habitual actions—count as autonomous, because the reason for them does not depend on our practical identity.

It seems obvious that we are not always the best judges of our own characters. I may think I am generally patient and kind, if perhaps a little lazy, even if my behavior (and my friends and family) would suggest otherwise. Simine Vazire calls instances in which others know things about the individual that the individual does not “blind spots of self-perception.”<sup>340</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel argues in this vein in his analysis of jerks. He thinks the

---

<sup>339</sup> Susan Wolf thinks that many of our actions are a result of love of some form. Ranging from actions like visiting a sick family member, helping a friend move, or putting the finishing touches on a Halloween costume to things like writing philosophy, practicing a musical instrument, and working in one's garden, Wolf thinks that we can have powerful reasons to act that are distinct from moral demands. Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4-5.

<sup>340</sup> Simine Vazire, “Who Knows What About a Person: The Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry Model,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98(2), 282.



jerk himself is likely the last person to know that he is a jerk. I can easily pick out the jerks around me, but it is not so easy to see when I am the jerk. Instead of thinking of myself as a jerk, I see those around me as stupid or as obstacles. And, further, he thinks that as soon as I recognize that I am a jerk, I am less a jerk than I was. I am, it seems, at least on the path to recovery.<sup>341</sup> On the other end of the character spectrum, a key part of certain virtues, like humility, seems to be being unaware of having them. Such perceptual distortion is not limited to character traits. In “Unskilled and Unaware of It,” Justin Kruger and David Dunning suggest that those least skilled in certain tasks were most prone to overestimate their abilities, while, conversely, the most competent individuals tended to underestimate their skills.<sup>342</sup>

If we take seriously the oracle at Delphi’s injunction to know ourselves, these potential blind spots of self-perception should give us pause. And that these blind spots seem more likely when the attitudes/beliefs/actions in question are morally-loaded only raises the stakes.<sup>343</sup> The more central an attitude or belief is to our self-conception, the more susceptible it may be to mis-perception. If the way we think of ourselves is central to our ability to act autonomously or authentically, then this could be devastating. But I think it is not clear to what extent self-ignorance challenges our agency. In a case like Frankfurt’s

---

<sup>341</sup> Or at least I am aware of the ways in which I treat people poorly. A complete jerk might be one who tramples over the considerations of others without a second thought. But one could go in the other direction, arguing that someone is even more of a jerk if they are aware they are treating people poorly and yet continue to do so.

<sup>342</sup> Justin Kruger and David Dunning, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Competence Lead To Inflated Self-Assessments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(6): 1121-1134.

<sup>343</sup> Schwitzgebel argues this in “Self-Ignorance,” 191-193.

temper-afflicted individual, his ignorance of his own (short) temper may challenge his sense of his agency, and this is no small matter. But to the extent that his emotions and the resulting actions are his—in the sense of objective identification—the fact that he does not subjectively identify with them need not undermine his agency. If he experiences them as foreign, maybe he cannot subjectively identify with them. But unlike Frankfurt, I don't think this is a clear reason to consider one's agency or one's moral responsibility undermined. He could very well still be an agent. How does this work? Let's start by examining the relationship between self-conception and practical identity.

If, following Christine Korsgaard, a practical identity is a description under which we value ourselves, how do our self-conceptions relate to our practical identity? That is, can I value myself under a certain description even if I do not see myself that way? This might seem to be simply wrongheaded. How can I value myself as an artist if I do not see myself as an artist? Or can I value myself as an impatient father even if I don't see myself in that way, or if I see myself in a way that conflicts with my actions? Does my practical identity depend more on my self-conception or on the way I engage with the world? If my practical identity is determined primarily by my self-conception, our practical identities seem particularly prone to worries of self-ignorance and self-deception. If I am mistaken about the sort of person that I am, why should the way I see myself determine my practical identity and, by extension, whether my actions are autonomous? On the other hand, however, if my practical identity is determined primarily by my actions, it can be hard to distinguish between actions which I am fully behind and those in which I am deeply ambivalent (or even opposed to what I find myself doing). I could, for example, have deep-seated tensions between family and work but ultimately believe that family is really more important and try to negotiate

work-family tensions in a way that reflects that belief/commitment. But if on a particular occasion I end up avoiding family responsibilities in order to pursue (what I judge to be less important) work obligations, am I acting in conflict with my practical identity or is my practical identity being revealed in this instance?

Practical identities, as I conceive them, are the basis on which we have or think we have reasons to act. It is because I am a parent that I have particular obligations to my children. I have reasons to feed them, play with them, read to them, help them learn to be good, and so forth. Because I see these as reasons, I feel failure when I fall short and experience tension when other things come into conflict with them. In this case, this aspect of my practical identity lines up with my self-conception, how I think of myself. I see myself as a parent and think it is an important part of who I am. It is something I subjectively identify with. But there could be elements of my practical identity that I do not identify with. I could be unaware that I perceive myself as having reasons that derive from some particular identity.

Let's say I always make it a point to be early to events. I plan my day well in advance and leave ample time for unexpected delays. But it's another question whether I conceive of myself as punctual. If someone were to point it out to me, I would probably agree with them but it was not (and may not become) something I subjectively identify with. I can have the practical identity of being punctual and organize my life around it, even if I am unaware that this is what I am doing.

I could even be somewhat hostile to the possibility that I have a practical identity. Maybe I don't see myself as distracted or as putting off what I need to do. I see myself as one who is focused, ambitious, and disciplined, someone who avoids frivolous

entertainment in order to focus on things that matter more—whether I am at work, at home, or with friends. I even (gently) belittle those who waste their time playing mindless games or watching predictable television shows. And further, I don't want to be the sort of person who spends their time in those ways. I have a self-conception of myself as focused and disciplined, as filling my life with worthwhile pursuits. But just because I think of myself in that way does not make it true. Maybe, in keeping with this self-conception, I don't play Angry Birds or Candy Crush. But I could think I have good reason to check my fantasy football team roster every hour and to scan NFL injury news morning and night in order to be competitive in my league with high school friends. And I could consistently put off preparing a lecture or revising a paper in order to see what is new on Facebook. Here, even though I have a self-conception of myself as a hard worker, disciplined and undistracted, I consistently see the world as offering good reason to take breaks from my work. Or put differently, I am guided by reasons stemming from a practical identity that goes against my self-conception. If I were pressed to explain these trends, I might resist thinking of myself as “distracted” or as a “procrastinator, preferring instead “fantasy football enthusiast” or “someone who keeps up with friends and news on Facebook.” But my resisting the description does not make it inapt.

That is not to say that self-conceptions are irrelevant to our practical identities. My self-conception can influence my practical identity. Conceiving of myself as a parent can reinforce my awareness of parental reasons and can make other reasons stand out. So it's not as if one's self-conception and one's practical identity are fenced off from each other. But a practical identity, so conceived, goes beyond the things that that an agent reflectively identifies with. And I think there is good reason to wonder how straightforward our ability

to reflectively identify with our actual practical identities really is. Because our practical identities shape and are shaped by the way we engage with the world, at the very least it requires a special kind of method to grasp them in the way they function as practical identities.

#### **IV. Existential Situatedness as Enabling Agency**

Let us return now to Merleau-Ponty's claim from the beginning of the chapter. He writes, "I am for myself neither 'jealous,' nor 'curious,' nor 'hunchbacked,' nor 'a civil servant.'"<sup>344</sup>

Even for the disabled person or the person suffering from a disease, he thinks, "in their own eyes they are not disabled or dying."<sup>345</sup> Those particular characteristics "are the price we pay, without even thinking about it, for being in the world."<sup>346</sup>

Even if we take ourselves to be more than our particular characteristics and roles, those particular characteristics and roles give us entry to the world. Even if we do not see ourselves as being "tall," "short," "curious," "patient," these and other characteristics shape the way we view the world. We see the world from a particular perspective. And even though that perspective is something that we can't help but occupy, it can also be difficult to see it as it appears from the outside. This isn't just a skeptical challenge. But because it is through our particular perspective that we engage with the world, the way we experience those perspectives is not obviously the same as they would show up to an external observer.

---

<sup>344</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 458.

<sup>345</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 458.

<sup>346</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 459. In an extended study in this vein, Simone de Beauvoir explores in detail the phenomenon of aging in *The Coming of Age*, translated by Patrick O'Brian (New York: Norton, 1996).

If we recall the example of the jerk, remember that a jerk may not think of himself as a jerk. But he is a jerk because he sees and acts on jerk-reasons. “Jerk reasons” are not identified as such. Rather, as the jerk goes about his day, he sees people driving too slowly, people doing stupid things, and others who need someone to tell it like it is. Even though he does not conceive of himself as a jerk, jerk is part of his practical identity to the extent that he sees and acts on “jerk reasons.” Similarly, the self-important person may not consciously think of himself as important. Instead, the interests and needs of others simply fail to (consistently) show up on his radar. If he has children, it isn’t that his children’s interests show up as unimportant; rather, it’s that they don’t show up, or, if they do, they show up as distractions from the pressing project at work, or the social media site he’s skimming, or the junk email he is deleting so he can get his inbox to zero.

We can see our practical identities most clearly in our reasons for action. So the best place to see them is in the way we engage with the world, in the reasons we think we have to act, and in the ways that people and activities solicit us to act. I can come to reflect on the way I live and come to form beliefs about my practical identity. But these beliefs and judgments about them are likely complicated inferences based on some hybrid of (1) first-personal access to the way the world shows up for us and (2) third-personal knowledge of character traits, tendencies, personality types, drawn from experience with others. And it can be hard to have accurate self-conceptions because it involves turning (1) into something requiring (2), when (1) doesn’t initially show up in the same format as (2).

Describing the way that our engagement with the world is prior to secondary judgments formed on the basis of that engagement, Merleau-Ponty writes:

“I am not conscious of being a worker or a bourgeois because I in fact sell my work or because I in fact show solidarity to the capitalist machine, and I certainly do not become a worker or a bourgeois the day that I commit to seeing history through the lens of class struggle. Rather, ‘I exist as a worker’ or ‘I exist as a bourgeois’ first, and this mode of communication with the world and society motivates both any revolutionary or conservative projects and my explicit judgments (‘I am a worker,’ or ‘I am a bourgeois’), without it being the case that I can deduce the former from the latter, nor the latter from the former.”<sup>347</sup>

In this passage, the practical identities of worker or bourgeois show up first in the agent’s day-to-day life. Explicit judgments about one’s practical identity depend on one’s everyday way of being. And just as “I am for myself neither ‘jealous,’ nor ‘curious,’ nor ‘hunchbacked,’ nor ‘a civil servant,’” it is unlikely that the worker or the bourgeois originally experience themselves as “a worker” or “a civil servant.” That is to say, it is their way of living and engaging in the world that is prior to their identification with a particular identity.

In “Federer Both Flesh and Not,” David Foster Wallace writes of the first-personal experience of the exceptionally athletically talented:

“Imagine that you’re a person with preternaturally good reflexes and coordination and speed, and that you’re playing high level tennis. Your experience, in play, will not be that you possess phenomenal reflexes and speed; rather, it will seem to you that the tennis ball is quite large and slow-moving and that you always have plenty of time to hit it. That is, you won’t experience anything like the (empirically real) quickness and skill that the live audience, watching tennis balls move so fast they hiss and blur, will attribute to you.”<sup>348</sup>

There is probably some level on which Federer knows he is an exceptionally talented tennis player. But as he engages with the world in light of this practical identity, his experience is of

---

<sup>347</sup> Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 468-469.

<sup>348</sup> David Foster Wallace, “Federer Both Flesh and Not,” *Both Flesh and Not* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2013), 20-21.

the situation, not of the sort of person that he is. In a similar way, our original engagement with the world, our perception of things, events and other people is shaped by our practical identities. But just as Roger Federer's experience of himself is not that he has extraordinary speed and reflexes, neither will our initial experience reveal us as a jerk, or self-important, or kind, or humble. Instead, we experience the equivalent of a large or a slow-moving ball. Much as the jerk sees people as stupid or as obstacles, the kind person going about her day sees someone who needs help or could use a word of encouragement.

Even when we are quite self-aware, a certain kind of self-knowledge would require us to get behind the very lens that gives us access to the world. That is not to say that we are inevitably equally self-ignorant. But it is to say that some of the conditions that make our agency possible are things that are difficult to get a clear sight on.<sup>349</sup> The very things that allow us to live rich human lives can also complicate what is often considered the distinctively human capacity to step back from our beliefs, desires, and motives and reflect on which of them we want to speak for us.

But even if it can be difficult to accurately translate a practical identity—understood as something like the lens through which one engages with the world—into a self-conception, this need not undermine our ability to engage with the world in self-directing ways. It is still the talented tennis player, or the jerk, or the kind person who is responding to

---

<sup>349</sup> In his recent book on *Freud*, Jonathan Lear says, “We are tempted to think of reason as a capacity to distance ourselves from our desires and judge them in reflective, self-conscious thought. But from a Freudian perspective, this very experience of ‘reflectively distancing’ oneself from one’s desire can be an illusion.” Given the complexities of the human psyche, he goes on, it may be that the “conception of rationality as reflective distance becomes inappropriate.” Lear, *Freud* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7.



the reasons for action, reasons stemming from and, when acted on, continuing to shape one's practical identity.

All this is not to say that there is no value in accurate self-conceptions. For one, as we better understand the sort of people that we are, we seem to be in a better position to change who we are. As long as the jerk remains unaware of his jerkitude—remaining entirely oblivious of the way that other people's desires and concerns fail to register for him in the proper way—it is unclear how he will start to change his ways.<sup>350</sup> Seeing who you are right now can have an important agential effect. It can allow you to better direct the course of who you want to be. But this change is complicated. There are multiple translations going on. There is the translation from the practical identity to an accurate self-conception, which requires the awareness that the way I see others means that I am a jerk. Often this involves others telling us as much. Then if I decide to stop being a jerk, there is a further process through which I become the person I want to be. This could be thought of translating something like a desired self-conception into a practical identity. If I want to be a kind person, I don't just want to know what a kind person would do and then do it. I want to see the world and others as a kind person sees them. In short, becoming the people we want to be involves more than (even very sincerely) committing to or identifying with certain ideals or ways of being.

My consciously identifying with a practical identity does not make me inhabit it; conversely, my consciously denying that I have a certain practical identity is not enough.

---

<sup>350</sup> Jerkitude is Eric Schwitzgebel's term in his "Theory of Jerks," *Aeon Magazine*, June 4, 2014. Schwitzgebel argues that the total jerk is one who is unaware of the fact that they are a jerk. I wonder if this is right. There seems to be something differently, and potentially more, problematic about the individual who is aware of their being a jerk but then buckles down and embraces it.

Some have argued that, given the nature of belief, one cannot believe at will. Because beliefs aim at the truth, even if there is a strong incentive to believe something, it is unclear that I can will myself to believe.<sup>351</sup> Analogously, it could be that one cannot *really* identify with a certain practical identity unless it fits (or is close to fitting). In normal conditions, there are constraints on what we can subjectively identify with. But those conditions can be compromised in various ways. In cases of stress or when one's actions reflect poorly on oneself—as in the case with Frankfurt's tantrum example or in the cases of implicit racism and sexism—we can find ourselves subjectively identifying with or, perhaps more likely, not identifying with an action or passion that fits the type of person we are. But just because I do not like the person I am (or the emotions/actions that are tied up with it) does not mean I am a different person. It could start me on that path, however.

At least some of the time, the person overcome by anger and the person who falls short of their (professed) commitments are acting autonomously. They are acting according to the reasons that they have as a result of their practical identity, even if their self-conceptions are not entirely accurate. That is, I think they are autonomous in their specific action. But there is another kind of self-direction that could be compromised to the extent that they remain self-ignorant. There is a sense in which we need to know who we are and where we stand before we can change in a self-directed way. Joseph Raz, for example, thinks that aspects of our identity—as, for example, parent, lover, and academic—are sources of meaning in our life and that “we must be true to who we are, true to it even as we try to

---

<sup>351</sup> If I offer my summer term students an A in the class if they can really believe that it is snowing outside, few even think forming such a belief is a real possibility, let alone actually believe it.

change it.”<sup>352</sup> In future work, I would like to explore what it means to be true to who we are even as we seek to change it. But it seems right that it is, in part, by being the people we are now that we can begin to change:

“It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther. The only way I can fail to be free is if I attempt to transcend my material and social situation by refusing to take it up at first, rather than meeting up with the natural and human world through it.”<sup>353</sup>

Living authentically or autonomously does not require a clear break from where I find myself right now. It is by living where I am, by acting on the reasons I have and taking ownership for the self that is tied up with those reasons, that I can start to more effectively direct the course of my life.

By understanding autonomy as tied up with one’s practical identity and realizing how a practical identity is distinct from a self-conception, we can see how we can act autonomously even when we act in ways that depart from how we think of ourselves. Practical identity, as it turns out, is also crucial for understanding authenticity. We act autonomously as our actions flow from our practical identity. We are authentic as we take ownership and responsibility for our practical identities that guide our lives. But as we have seen, particularly in the last two chapters, the relationship between the two can be complicated. Acting autonomously on certain conceptions of some practical identities, for

---

<sup>352</sup> Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>353</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 482-483.

example, can make it hard for us to take ownership for our lives in the sense required by authenticity. But this sort of challenge seems appropriate for the sorts of creatures we are.

## Bibliography

- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Arpaly, Nomy. "Huckleberry Finn Revisited: Inverse Akrasia and Moral Ignorance." In *The Nature of Moral Responsibility*, Edited by Randolph Clarke, Michael McKenna, and Angela M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 141-156.
- . *Unprincipled Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Coming of Age*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian. New York: Norton, 1996.
- Blattner, William. "Authenticity and Resoluteness." In *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time*. Edited by Mark Wrathall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013: 320-337.
- . *Heidegger's Being and Time*. New York: Continuum, 2007.
- Bloom, Alan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.
- Bratman, Michael. "Autonomy and Hierarchy." In *Structures of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: 162-186.
- . "Reflection, Planning, and Temporally Extended Agency." In *Structures of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007: 21-46.
- . *Structures of Agency*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Buss, Sarah. "Personal Autonomy." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Camus, Albert. *The Plague*. New York: Modern College Library, 1965.
- Carman, Taylor. "Authenticity and Asymmetry." *Heidegger's Analytic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Cassam, Quassim. *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Cohen, G.A. "Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law." In *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 167-188.
- Crawford, Matthew. *The World Beyond Your Head*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.

- Damisch, Lysann, Barbara Stoberock, and Thomas Mussweiler. "Keep Your Fingers Crossed! How Superstition Improves Performance." *Psychological Science* 21(7): 1014–1020.
- Davidson, Donald. "Agency." In *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001: 43-62.
- Doris, John. *Talking to Our Selves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from the Underground*. In *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky*. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Feinberg, Joel. *Harm to Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Feldman, Simon and Allan Hazlett. "What's Bad About Bad Faith." *European Journal of Philosophy* 21(1): 50-73.
- Fingarette, Herbert. *Self-Deception*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2000.
- Fischer, John Martin. "Responsibility and Autonomy: The Problem of Mission Creep." *Philosophical Issues* 22(1): 165-184.
- "Sourcehood: Playing the Cards that Are Dealt You." *Deep Control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: 163-185.
- "What Moral Responsibility is Not." Unpublished MS.
- Frankfurt, Harry. "Freedom of the Will and The Concept of a Person. In *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988: 11-25.
- "Identification and Externality." In *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988: 58-68.
- *Reasons of Love*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- *The Importance of What We Care About*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Gammons, Peter. "Pretty Fair for a Fowl Guy." *Sports Illustrated* 64(15), April 14, 1984, 44-49.
- Goodwin, Kearns Doris. "Batting Champ Wade Boggs Hits with a Cool Eye, a Hot Hand and a Resolve to Help His Sister Overcome Illness." *People* 25(24), June 16, 1986.

- Guignon, Charles. "Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy," *Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*. Edited by Charles Guignon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: 215-239.
- . *On Being Authentic*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Haugeland, John. *Dasein Disclosed*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Heidegger, Martin. Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- . *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006 (19<sup>th</sup> Edition).
- Hill, Thomas. "Servility and Self-Respect." *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991: 4-18.
- . "Self-Respect Reconsidered." *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991: 19-24.
- Hough, Sheridan. *Kierkegaard's Dancing Tax Collector: Faith, Finitude, and Silence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*. New York: Penguin, 1987.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- Jaworska, Agnieszka. "Caring and Internality," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74(3): 529-568.
- Kierkegaard, Soren. *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans. Reidar Thomte. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- . *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, vol. 2: F-K. Edited by Howard Hong and Edna Hong. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1970.
- Killmister, Suzy. "The Problem of Socialization." *Social Theory and Practice* 39(1): 95-119.
- . "The Woody Allen Puzzle: How 'Authentic Alienation' Complicates Autonomy." *Nous* 49(4): 729-747.
- Korsgaard, Christine. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- . *Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

- "The Activity of Reason," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 83(2): 23-43.
- Kruger, Justin and David Dunning, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Competence Lead To Inflated Self-Assessments." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77(6): 1121-1134.
- Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: Norton, 1979.
- Lear, Jonathan. *Freud*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- *A Case for Irony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- *Radical Hope*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Lomasky, Loren. *Persons, Rights, and the Moral Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage, 1974.
- *The Genealogy of Morality*. Translated by Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swensen. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998.
- Norcross, J.C. and D.J. Vangarelli, "The Resolution Solution: Longitudinal Examination of New Year's Change Attempts." *Journal of Substance Abuse* 1(2): 127-134.
- Penelhum, Terence. "The Importance of Self-Identity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68(20): 667-678.
- Pinkard, Terry. *German Philosophy: 1760-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Raz, Joseph. *Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- *Value, Respect, and Attachment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Richardson, John. *Heidegger*. New York: Routledge, 2012.



- Rouse, Scot. "Heidegger, Sociality, and Human Agency." *European Journal of Philosophy* (2013).
- . *Thrown Projection: An Interpretation and Defense of the Hermeneutic Conception of the Self in Heidegger's Being and Time*. PhD Dissertation. (2011).
- Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1984.
- Scanlon, T.M. *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Scheffler, Samuel. "Valuing." In *Equality and Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010: 15-40.
- Schwitzgebel, Eric. "Self-Ignorance." In *Consciousness and the Self*. Edited by JeeLoo Liu & John Perry. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012: 184-197.
- . "Theory of Jerks." *Aeon Magazine*. June 4, 2014.
- Seidman, Jeffrey. "Valuing and Caring," *Theoria* 75(4): 272-303.
- Stegner, Wallace. *Angle of Repose*. Penguin Classics, 1971.
- Strout, Elizabeth. *The Burgess Boys*. New York: Random House, 2013.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- . *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Thomson, Iain. "Death and Demise in *Being and Time*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time*. Edited by Mark Wrathall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Tobia, Kevin. "Personal Identity and the Phineas Gage Effect." *Analysis* 75(3): 396-405.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Penguin, 2000.
- . *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage, 2009.

- Vazire, Simine. "Who Knows What About a Person: The Self-Other Knowledge Asymmetry Model," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98(2): 281-300.
- Velleman, J. David. "Introduction." *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000: 1-31.
- "Motivation by Ideal." In *Self to Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: 312-329.
- *Self to Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- "The Guise of the Good." *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- "Willing the Law." In *Self to Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: 284-311.
- *The Possibility of Practical Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Vyse, Stuart. *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Wrathall, Mark. "Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self." in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and the Self*. Edited by Denis McManus. New York: Routledge, 2015: 193-214.
- Wallace, David Foster. *Both Flesh and Not*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2013.
- Walzer, Michael. "On Involuntary Association." In *Freedom of Association*. Edited by Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998: 64-74.
- Watson, Gary. *Agency and Answerability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- "Free Action and Free Will." In *Agency and Answerability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 161-196.
- "Free Agency." In *Agency and Answerability*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004: 13-32.
- Williams, Bernard. "Persons, Character, and Morality," *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982: 1-19.
- "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality." *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973: 82-100.

Wolf, Susan. *Meaning in Life and Why it Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Wrathall, Mark. "Autonomy, Authenticity, and the Self." in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and the Self*. Edited by Denis McManus. New York: Routledge, 2015: 193-214.

Yaffe, Gideon. *Liberty Worth the Name: Locke on Free Agency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.