

## The Virtue of Authenticity<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the idea of authenticity, both what it is and why it’s valuable. My paper has four parts. First, I identify and criticize three popular approaches to authenticity: **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY**, **NATURAL AUTHENTICITY**, and **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY**. Second, I defend a fourth approach to authenticity – what I call **EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY (EA)** – which is comprised of three basic elements: (a) self-understanding, (b) self-expression, and (c) self-concern – in particular, concern about what kind of person one is and what type of life one lead. Third, I argue that authenticity is best seen as an individual as opposed to social virtue. Fourth and lastly, I explore why EA is valuable in both instrumental and non-instrumental ways.

### I. Introduction

“If there’s one theme in all my work it’s about authenticity and self-expression. It’s the idea that some things are in some real sense really you, or express what you are, and others aren’t.”  
- Bernard Williams<sup>2</sup>

The idea of ‘authenticity’ plays an important role in many different fields, including sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, literary studies, political theory, and business marketing.<sup>3</sup> Among philosophers, it is typically associated with existentialists such as Heidegger and Sartre.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, however, a growing number of analytic moral philosophers have taken up this topic. This includes not only philosophers writing in the context of the autonomy literature, such as John Christman, Gerald Dworkin, Harry Frankfurt, Alfred Mele, Diana Meyers, Marina Oshana, J. David Velleman, and others, but also many philosophers who defend more general accounts of authenticity including K. Anthony Appiah, Charles Larmore, Charles Taylor, and Bernard Williams.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, we might worry from the outset that this entire enterprise is doomed to failure. Talk of an ‘authentic’ or ‘true’ self, of ‘bad faith’ and ‘inauthenticity’, and of the ideal of ‘being true to oneself’ seem like hopelessly vague and fuzzy ideas, ones that capture popular imagination but fail to provide any genuine ethical insights. In order to address these skeptical worries, I try to offer a detailed account of authenticity here, both what it is and why it is valuable. This paper has three parts. First, in §§2-3, I critically examine three popular conceptions of authenticity. Second, in §4, I present my own account of authenticity. I defend three main claims: (1) that authenticity is best seen as a personal rather than social virtue; (2) that it is typically constituted by three main elements, viz., self-understanding, self-expression, and self-concern – in particular, concern about what kind of person one is and what type of life one leads; and (3) that it resembles traditional Aristotelian virtues insofar as it can involve steering a middle course between two extremes, viz., a ‘deficiency’ (i.e., various forms of

inauthenticity) and an ‘excess’ (i.e., a type of narcissistic self-centeredness which critics of authenticity rightly disparage). Third and lastly, in §5, I examine why authenticity is valuable.

## 2. Three Popular Conceptions of Authenticity

Nowadays we find talk of ‘authenticity’ almost everywhere. It is pervasive in product advertising, such as for *Stoli Vodka* (“Choose Authenticity”), *Kool* cigarettes (“Be Authentic”), *Ralph Lauren Jeans* (“Authentic Denim Outfitters”), *Abercrombie and Fitch* (“Authentic American Clothing Since 1892”), *Diesel Jeans* (“Don’t Listen to Them. Don’t Listen to Us. Be Authentic. Be Yourself.”), and *highbrowfurniture.com* (“Authenticity. Period.”). It is common in tourism slogans, including for Maryland (“Even the Fun is Authentic”), Florida (“Real. Authentic. Florida”), Niagara Falls (“The Authentic Falls Experience”), and Cuba (“Authentic Cuba”). And many businesses build the idea of authenticity into their very names, including *Authentic Bagel Company*, *Authentic Business Systems*, *Authentic Clothing*, *Authentic Media*, *Authentic Publishers*, *Authentic Records*, *Authentic Sports Management*, *Authentic Technologies*, etc. Indeed, *Time* magazine in 2008 declared ‘authenticity’ to be one of the “10 ideas that are changing the world”.<sup>6</sup>

The main worry is that the term ‘authenticity’ has been used so often, and in so many different contexts, that it has become virtually devoid of meaning. Nearly everybody agrees that the concept of authenticity involves *some* claim about ‘being true to oneself’. But can we say anything more concrete than this? In general, I argue that most of our talk of authenticity in popular culture falls under three broad headings, each of which has important philosophical precedents. These three conceptions of authenticity are:<sup>7</sup>

1. **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY**, which emphasizes a more *social* sense of authenticity (cf. Nietzsche on ‘the herd’, Kierkegaard on ‘the crowd’, and Heidegger on ‘the They’)
2. **NATURAL/ORIGINAL AUTHENTICITY**, which emphasizes a more *metaphysical* sense of authenticity (cf. Rousseau on the ‘natural man’ or so-called ‘noble savage’ in contrast to ‘modern man’)
3. **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY**, which emphasizes a more *ethical* sense of authenticity (cf. Sartre on ‘bad faith’)

These three conceptions of authenticity are related to corresponding accounts of the nature of the ‘self’. Each involves a set of binary oppositions, where the former terms are regarded as authentic, the latter as inauthentic. These are:

1. The ‘individual’ self vs. the ‘social’ self
2. ‘The ‘natural’/‘original’ self vs. the ‘socialized’ self
3. The ‘true’/‘honest’/‘sincere’ self vs. the ‘false’/‘dishonest’/‘insincere’/‘hypocritical’ self

The first and arguably most influential popular conception of authenticity is **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY**. On this more *social* approach, we are most authentic when we are ‘unique’, ‘original’, or ‘stand apart from the crowd’. This account has both negative and positive dimensions. In a negative sense,

in order to be authentic, we must somehow separate ourselves from what various thinkers call ‘the herd’ (Nietzsche), ‘the crowd’ (Kierkegaard), or ‘the They’ (Heidegger) understood in terms of the general masses. We do so by not giving in to peer pressure, by not being mere ‘sheep’ or social conformists who just thoughtlessly ‘go along with the flow’. Instead, in a positive sense, we must live up to the responsibility of ‘being our own person’. This account of authenticity is widespread. We see it implicitly assumed by a tourism slogan for Maine (“Where original people perfectly complement the beauty of this place... Be adventurous. Be yourself. Discover your Maine thing.”) and explicitly stated in the *Diesel Jeans* ad campaign mentioned above (“Don’t Listen to Them. Don’t Listen to Us. Be Authentic. Be Yourself.”).<sup>8</sup> In an interview with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, appeals to this sense of authenticity when she claims: “If you fear what people think about you, then you are not being authentic.”<sup>9</sup> And Charles Taylor provides a more philosophical analysis of this notion of authenticity when discussing the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, writing:

Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human... There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s... Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover... This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity. (1992:28-9)

As Edward Young succinctly captures the overall idea: “Born *Originals*, how comes it to pass that we die *Copies*?”<sup>10</sup> To sum up, on this first approach, we are most authentic when we are ‘individual’ versus ‘social’ selves, that is, when we are true to our individual or unique natures, however much this might bring us into conflict with the society in which we live.

The second popular conception of authenticity is **NATURAL/ ORIGINAL AUTHENTICITY**. On this more *metaphysical* approach, we are most authentic when we live in conformity with our more ‘natural’ or ‘original’ self. The overall idea is that the closer that some person, place, or thing is to its ‘natural’ or ‘original’ state – in terms of being ‘pure’, ‘innocent’, ‘raw’, ‘unfiltered’, or ‘unadulterated’ – the more authentic it is. In *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*, James Gilmore and Joseph Pine describe this sense of authenticity as follows: “People tend to perceive as authentic that which exists in its natural state in or of the earth, remaining untouched by human hands; not artificial or synthetic” (2007:49). We again find this conception of authenticity in many advertising campaigns, such as for *The Club at Spanish Peaks*, a luxury development in Big Sky, Montana (“Authentic Montana: Unspoiled. Uncrowded. Unpretentious”); *Whole Foods*, billed as “the world’s largest retailer of natural and organic foods”, whose very “essence”, according to co-CEO Walter Robb, is “authenticity”;<sup>11</sup> and Michigan’s recent award-winning tourism campaign, which purportedly presents us with ‘authentic’ – in the sense of natural, raw, or unfiltered – images of “Pure Michigan”.<sup>12</sup> This conception of authenticity also underlies our talk of ‘authentic’ cuisine (e.g., authentic ‘fill-in-your-favorite-nationality-food’), ‘authentic’ musical performances (e.g., Baroque musical compositions

played on period instruments), and ‘authentic’ culture (e.g., authentic Native American or aboriginal culture, where this typically includes authentic food, music, dance, clothing, art, etc.). In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Discourse, Rousseau addresses this conception of authenticity. Reflecting on the fateful transition from ‘original man’, living in a state of nature, to people living in modern civil society, he writes:

In a word, [the intelligent reader] will explain how the human soul and passions, by imperceptible adulterations, so to speak change in Nature; why in the long run the objects of our needs and of our pleasures change; why, as original man gradually vanishes, Society no longer offers to the eyes of the wise man anything but an assemblage of artificial men and factitious passions which are the product of all these new relationships, and have no true foundation in Nature. (1997:186)

Rousseau argues here that entering into modern civil society has somehow made us lose touch with our ‘authentic’ selves.<sup>13</sup> That is, this overall socialization process – typically involving a kind of inflamed *amour-propre* – has brought about a drastic ‘change’ in human nature. It transforms us into ‘artificial’ persons with ‘factitious passions’ and needs, a condition which has ‘no true foundation in Nature’. And in *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*, 20<sup>th</sup>-century Swiss psychoanalyst Alice Miller defends a similar claim with respect to individual persons. She argues that in the process of becoming adults, each child typically:

...develops in such a way that he reveals only what is expected of him... A process of emptying, impoverishment, and crippling of his potential actually took place [in which] the integrity of the child was injured when all that was alive and spontaneous in him was cut off (1997:11-12).

Miller identifies what she calls the ‘true self’ – that is, who we ‘authentically’ are – with our more natural, pure, or spontaneous self. This stands in contrast to the ‘as-if personality’ we develop in order to satisfy the expectations of our parents and other authority figures.

The third and final popular conception of authenticity is **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY**. On this more *ethical* approach, we are most authentic when we are ‘true’, ‘honest’, or ‘sincere’ selves as opposed to being ‘false’, ‘dishonest’, ‘insincere’, or ‘hypocritical’ selves. This type of authenticity is highly prized in present-day society. As Tim Russert of NBC’s *Meet the Press* laments: “People are begging for authenticity.”<sup>14</sup> And as *Washington Post Circle* columnist Kathleen Parker argues, what matters most for us with regard to politicians “...is authenticity. There's no surer way to lose the public's confidence than to pretend to be something you're not.”<sup>15</sup> This conception of authenticity presumably lies behind statements like those of Anderson Cooper (“In everything I’ve done, I’ve always tried to just be authentic and real”), Hilary Rodham Clinton (“I believe in being as authentic as possible”), and Michele Bachman (“I think that what people see in me is that I’m a real person. I’m authentic”, declared after her Iowa victory).<sup>16</sup> And we condemn those who fail to display this type of authenticity. Recall Tom Brokaw’s famous statement about Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign on *The Last Word with Lawrence O’Donnell*: “This is the most inauthentic spontaneous

candidate that I've ever seen.”<sup>17</sup> As one commentator interpreted Brokaw's remark: “Inauthentic? Did Tom Brokaw just call [Romney] a phony... or a liar?”<sup>18</sup> In general, we demand **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY** just as much from ordinary people as from public figures. We regard liars, cheats, fakes, phonies, and hypocrites – that is, anyone who fails to “walk the talk” – as inauthentic. Sartre arguably had this type of authenticity in mind with his account of ‘bad faith’.

There are two important qualifications about this taxonomy. First, although these three popular conceptions of authenticity often overlap, they are conceptually distinct. For example, we can imagine somebody who displays **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY** – that is, she is a unique individual who stands apart from the crowd – while failing to be authentic in the other two senses. This could happen if, for example, *contra* **NATURAL AUTHENTICITY**, her individuality is based upon how all *her more socialized personality traits* combine to distinguish her from everybody else. And *contra* **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY**, her individuality could be based *precisely on the fact that she is dishonest or insincere*, in contrast to the prevailing ethical norms of her society. Second, although I have suggested that these three popular conceptions are related to various important philosophers – (1) **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY** with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, (2) **NATURAL AUTHENTICITY** with Rousseau, and (3) **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY** with Sartre – I do not think that any of these thinkers would endorse the specific versions of authenticity as laid out here. In the next section, I offer suggestions for how we should refine these popular conceptions of authenticity and identify what seems to be the common valid core underlying each of them.

### 3. Refining the Three Popular Conceptions of Authenticity

While all three of these popular conceptions of authenticity have widespread appeal, I think that, as presently understood, they are too one-sided. By correcting these deficiencies, I argue that we can ultimately arrive at a more satisfying account of authenticity. From the outset, however, it is interesting to observe that all three conceptions of authenticity appear to face a similar practical difficulty. Generally speaking, it seems that striving for authenticity in these various ways can often be self-defeating, at least when judged by the standards of each particular conception. With respect to **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY**, we find that people who attempt to be original, unique, or to stand apart from the crowd – that is, to achieve what K. Anthony Appiah calls “the Bohemian ideal” (2005:106) – often ironically end up just resembling every other non-conformist. With respect to **NATURAL AUTHENTICITY**, it seems that our self-conscious striving to be ‘natural’ often leads us to behave in very unnatural ways. As La Rochefoucauld wryly remarks: “Nothing makes it so difficult to be natural as the desire to appear so.”<sup>19</sup> And with respect to **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY**, Sartre insists that in their efforts to be sincere, so-called “champions of sincerity” often engage in many acts of self-deception. As he famously remarks, it is a “truth recognized by all that one can fall into bad faith through being sincere.” (1984:109). Call these three practical difficulties related to our various attempts at being

authentic the ‘Nonconformist’, ‘Naturalness’, and ‘Sincerity’ Problems. While none of them undermine these three popular conceptions of authenticity, they do serve to remind us that we must be careful in how we formulate the ideals related to each conception of authenticity in order to avoid certain common pitfalls. In the rest of this section, I explore some deeper worries that force us to revise more fundamentally how we should understand each particular conception of authenticity.

First, with regard to **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY**, the main worry is it is very tempting to interpret this conception of authenticity – with its ideals of ‘standing apart from the crowd’, of not being a ‘social conformist’, of not getting lost in the ‘They’, etc., – as defending *an overly individualistic view of the self* in which the individual must stand over against all social influences. As most philosophers point out, however, our very identity as individuals is deeply shaped by the societies in which we live. We are ‘social selves’ in at least three different ways. First, we come to know what it even means to be a person through our interactions with others. As Annette Baier argues, we are essentially ‘second persons’, that is, individuals “who [are] dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of personhood (1985:84).” Second, most of our concrete identities – e.g., as parents, children, friends, lovers, members of an ethnic group, citizens of a state, etc. – are inextricably bound up with various social conventions and meanings. Third and lastly, most of our individual pursuits not only derive their significance from, but are also necessarily sustained by, the various social practices and traditions in which we find ourselves immersed. As Heidegger expresses this overall idea in *Being and Time*:

*Authentic Being-one’s-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the ‘they’: *it is rather an existentiell modification of the ‘they’ – of the ‘they’ as an essential existentiale* (1962:168)

Heidegger argues that, in order to be authentic, we should not try to entirely ‘detach’ ourselves from society. Rather, we should just ‘modify’ our relationship to it in the right kind of way. Indeed, he insists that our relationship to ‘the They’ (*das Man*) constitutes an ‘essential’ part of who we are. Charles Taylor criticizes overly individualistic conceptions of authenticity on very similar grounds, arguing:

Otherwise put, I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter... Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial (1991:40-1).

Understood this way, we should revise our conception of **INDIVIDUAL AUTHENTICITY** to allow for the fact that who we really are *as individuals* often cannot be understood apart from our concrete social identities.

Second, with regard to **NATURAL/ORIGINAL AUTHENTICITY**, the main worry is that we can understand this conception of authenticity in at least three different ways, where the first two seem highly problematic. First, we might be claiming that we are only ever truly authentic insofar as we are wholly natural or non-socialized selves, e.g., infants or some ‘natural savage’ living in a brute animal-like existence. On this view, it seems that authenticity

is impossible for the majority of us insofar as we can never truly return to such an original state. As Rousseau claims in a famous footnote from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Discourse, we can never recover our “first innocence” since our “passions have forever destroyed their original simplicity” (1997:203). More broadly, in this original state where *ex hypothesi* we entirely lack any self-awareness, there seems to be no possibility for being inauthentic. We just are what we are. But if there’s no genuine possibility for being inauthentic, then it seems that there’s no genuine possibility for being authentic either, at least in any substantive sense. Second, we might be claiming that this ‘natural’ or ‘original’ self is based upon some wholly unchanging ‘natural core’ which remains exactly the same throughout all the changes in our lives. The main problem with this approach is that it seems to endorse *an overly static or fixed conception of the true self*. Even if there is some ‘natural core’ which persists throughout our entire lives, we should allow for a third possibility, viz., that being authentic is compatible with this ‘natural core’ being deeply modified over time through a long process of growth and maturity – something Rousseau himself recognizes in most of his writings.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it seems possible that being authentic might involve *giving up* certain ‘natural’ or ‘original’ traits that we no longer identify with.

Third and lastly, with regard to **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY**, the main worry is that this conception of authenticity is ambiguous between two very different interpretations, viz., (1) being true *to oneself* or (2) being true *to others*. Notice that nearly all the quotes above related to **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY** go back and forth between these two interpretations, typically assuming that (1) and (2) just coincide. But this seems mistaken for two reasons. First, being truthful, honest, or sincere with other people does not seem to be a *necessary condition* for being authentic. Take, for example, the standard case where we need to lie to a murderer or a Nazi at the door in order to protect innocent lives. In such circumstances, it seems that choosing to lie can be a fully authentic course of action. Indeed, we might feel that *not* lying to the murderer or the Nazi in this case would amount to an inauthentic violation or betrayal of who we really are as persons. An even more radical possibility is that somebody’s ‘true self’ could be essentially deceptive at its core. That is, akin to Milton’s Satan who declares “Evil, thou art my good”, it seems logically possible for somebody to honestly declare, “Lying or deception, thou art my true nature.”<sup>21</sup> In this case, being authentic would in fact *require* her to always lie to others. Second, being truthful, honest, or sincere with other people does not seem to be a *sufficient condition* for being authentic either. For example, consider Sartre’s portrayal of the character Inez in his play *No Exit*. Inez is clearly honest – indeed, brutally so – towards other people. Nonetheless, Sartre depicts her – and most so-called ‘champions of sincerity’ – as inauthentic or in ‘bad faith’ insofar as she is self-deceived about her own ability to choose and act differently than she does.<sup>22</sup> Thus, while **TRUTHFUL AUTHENTICITY** does appear to necessarily include some idea of being ‘true to ourselves’, we should avoid saddling this conception of authenticity *with an overly moralized view of the true self* which would also require us to be truthful, honest, or sincere with other people.

In the end, we can affirm these three popular conceptions of authenticity just as long as we steer clear of implausibly interpreting what it

means to be ‘true to oneself’ in either (1) *overly individualistic*, (2) *overly static or fixed*, or (3) *overly moralized* ways. In the next section, I try to build upon this key insight in developing my own account of authenticity.

#### 4. Authenticity as a Personal Virtue

Based on the results from §3, I propose the following highly formal account of authenticity, viz., that *whatever the correct philosophical analysis of the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self is, authenticity simply involves relating to this self in the right kind of way*. Obviously, we need to clarify two things here: (1) what we mean by a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self; and (2) what it means to relate to this self ‘in the right kind of way’. First, in keeping with a more formal approach, I want to leave the nature of what I will henceforth call the ‘true self’ relatively open. In particular, I do not want to be necessarily committed to thinking about the true self in any metaphysically dubious way, as some kind of substantial entity “waiting to be found” or “buried deep within”.<sup>23</sup> It seems that our true self could be just as much a matter of ‘self-definition’ or ‘self-creation’ as it is a matter of ‘self-discovery’ of various preexisting traits (cf. Meyers 1989 and 2000 and Appiah 2005). Furthermore, I do not want to be necessarily committed to thinking about the ‘true self’ in standard Frankfurtian ways. In particular, the present account does not presuppose that our ‘true self’ must involve (1a) some ‘motivational essence’ without which we would no longer be us, or (1b) what we are ‘wholehearted’ about, or (1c) what we ‘reflectively endorse’ or ‘identify’ with.<sup>24</sup> That is, I leave it an open question whether Frankfurt’s many critics are correct (as I suspect they are to a large extent) (2a) that ‘motivational essences’ amount to misleading metaphorical talk; (2b) that our true self could be ‘intersectional’ or deeply conflicted in nature, embodying opposing elements, rather than necessarily ‘wholehearted’ and ‘unified’; and (2c) that our true self might involve not only those elements we reflectively endorse or identify with, but also certain central repressed aspects of our personality which we might be reluctant – or even altogether refuse – to own up to.<sup>25</sup>

Instead, for present purposes, I think that all we need to assume about our true self is that “some of our concerns are authoritative for us *because they are somehow central to our personalities*” (Velleman 2005:339, emphasis added). By talking about certain concerns being ‘authoritative for us’ – or, in the present idiom, as representing our ‘true selves’ – insofar as ‘they are somehow central to our personalities’, I want to defend a relatively modest thesis. The main idea is that my ‘true self’ or what is most ‘central’ to my identity is constituted by those personal features which, objectively speaking, have a more significant or wide-ranging impact upon how I think, feel, and act, than those which do not. To adopt a spatial metaphor, such features may have (a) *great breadth*, in the sense that they are what Arpaly and Schroeder (1999) describe as ‘well-integrated’ features that connect up with many other aspects of my personality. Or they may have (b) *great depth*, in the sense that they are features which – whether widely-connected or relatively isolated – I am strongly committed to.<sup>26</sup>

Second, we need to clarify what it means to relate to this true self ‘in the right kind of way’. Again, I want to leave this claim relatively open. More



specifically, I agree with Charles Larmore that authenticity can come in either reflective or non-reflective forms.<sup>27</sup> In general, it seems possible for certain people to be authentic in a wholly non-reflective way, where they might even be ignorant about the nature of their true self. Consider the case of a person who displays what Julia Driver calls a “virtue of ignorance” like, say, modesty, where one underestimates one’s own self-worth.<sup>28</sup> It seems possible that she can authentically conform to her ‘true self’, i.e., her modest nature, despite the fact that she is necessarily ignorant about certain facts about her own identity. For present purposes, however, I want to focus mainly upon what Larmore calls more ‘reflective’ forms of authenticity. This is instructive for two reasons. First, this type of authenticity is most likely what traditional existentialists had in mind – and thus, probably what many of us also have in mind insofar as existentialism has had a wide-ranging impact on our present-day thinking about authenticity. For instance, Heidegger describes authenticity as a kind of self-conscious ‘resoluteness’ (*Entschlossenheit*), and both Heidegger’s and Sartre’s main examples of inauthenticity involve non-reflective persons who either allow themselves to be mindlessly caught up in ‘the They’ [Heidegger] or who refuse, in an act of ‘bad faith’, to fully own up to their own ‘facticity’ or ‘transcendence’ [Sartre].<sup>29</sup> Second, as we will see later, elaborating upon this more reflective form of authenticity will provide us with helpful resources for thinking about authenticity as akin to traditional Aristotelian virtues.

For the sake of convenience, I will call this more reflective version of authenticity ‘Existentialist Authenticity’ [EA], leaving aside the historical question of whether this account faithfully captures all of Heidegger’s and Sartre’s central ideas about authenticity. EA requires satisfying three main conditions, viz., that:

1. *S* has an accurate understanding of her true self
2. *S* lives in conformity with that accurate self-understanding
3. *S* cares about what type of person she is and lives in conformity with her accurate self-understanding, at least to some extent, out of such concern

Let me take each condition in turn. First, EA requires that (1) *we have an accurate understanding of our true self*. This involves two dimensions. First, we must have a minimal self-awareness of who or what we are like as persons. Second, this self-awareness must be accurate, at least to some extent. For example, suppose that being Catholic constitutes an important part of Bob’s identity, informing most of his actions and choices. If Bob correctly recognizes this fact about himself, then he has an accurate self-understanding at least with respect to this part of his identity.

There are three important caveats here. First, what this accurate self-understanding involves can vary widely. While it presumably does not require knowing certain trivial minutiae about ourselves (e.g., our exact red blood cell count, the average number of steps we walk every day, the fact that we prefer drinking water from a straw, etc.), there are many aspects of who and what we are like as persons which are relevant for authenticity. These may include various likes and dislikes, tastes, values, and ideals; talents or abilities; general behavioral dispositions; and more robust facts like what

Rorty and Wong describe as ‘identity-defining’ traits.<sup>30</sup> Second, we can have varying degrees of self-understanding. At one extreme, it seems possible to have an accurate *global* self-understanding such that we know all aspects of our identity. For ordinary human beings, however, we only ever achieve an accurate *local* self-understanding. That is, we typically have an accurate self-understanding about certain aspects of our identity, while lacking it for others. Third and lastly, our accurate self-understanding can be had either implicitly or explicitly. Not all cases of self-understanding require forming an explicit belief of the sort: “I am *really* X as opposed to Y”. Take the case of John, a ‘salt-of-the-earth’ type who eats, drinks, and breathes farming. He has never explicitly reflected upon his identity as a farmer. Nonetheless, for the sake of argument, assume that he fully embraces this lifestyle and would not have it any other way. Does John possess an accurate self-understanding about his identity as a farmer? It seems possible. Consider a situation where John is forced to temporarily reside in a large metropolis like LA. In this case, it seems that John might be able to immediately recognize – without any need for self-scrutiny – that an “LA lifestyle” is not for him. What this example shows is that John likely possessed an accurate implicit self-understanding about what type of lifestyle is most suitable – or more precisely, *not* suitable – for him all along, even if he never explicitly formulated this belief for himself.

Second, EA requires that, in addition to having an accurate self-understanding, (2) *we must live in conformity with that self-understanding*. Following Bernard Williams, perhaps the best way to explain this condition is in terms of the idea of ‘self-expression’.<sup>31</sup> As Abraham Maslow argues, we can distinguish between two general types of actions: ‘coping’ and ‘expressive’ actions.<sup>32</sup> Coping actions are instrumental purposive actions directed towards some aim. That is, they are cases of ‘means-ends behavior’ which involve “an interaction of the [subject] with the world, adjusting each to the other with mutual affect” (1949:264). By contrast, expressive actions are non-instrumental or non-purposive. As Maslow puts it, an expressive action should be seen as an “end-in-itself”, one which “simply mirrors, reflects, signifies, or expresses some state of the organism” (1949:262). Notice that the same act-type can fall under either category. For example, I could shovel the snow from my neighbor’s driveway because I intend to ask a favor from her later on or just out of a concern to help somebody in need. The former is a ‘coping’ action aimed at some future benefit, whereas the latter is an ‘expressive’ action which simply expresses my concern for my neighbor’s well-being.

With this distinction in mind, I argue that living in conformity with our accurate self-understanding amounts to ‘mirroring’, ‘reflecting’, ‘signifying’, or ‘expressing’ our true self. What does this mean in concrete terms? Consider a parallel case. Say that Mary is my close friend. The fact that I am deeply committed to my friendship with Mary constitutes what Joseph Raz calls an ‘expressive reason’ for me to think, feel, and act in certain ways.<sup>33</sup> To live in conformity with an accurate understanding of my friendship with Mary requires ‘expressing’ myself in various ways, e.g., having friendly feelings towards her, being disposed to think about her often, typically preferring her company over others, etc. In a similar way, I argue that the fact that I am deeply committed to some X (e.g., a goal, project,

social role, etc.) such that X comprises a genuine part of my ‘true self’ likewise constitutes an ‘expressive reason’ for me to think, feel, and act in certain ways. For example, suppose that being a philosopher comprises a deep part of my ‘true self’ or what is most ‘central’ to me as a person. If so, then living in conformity with my accurate self-understanding requires me to conduct myself in various ways – e.g., reading articles, writing papers, giving talks, etc. – that express my identity as a philosopher.

Third and lastly, EA requires that (3) *we care about what kind of person we are, and choose to live in conformity with our accurate self-understanding, at least to some extent, out of such concern.* That is, according to EA, it is not sufficient that we have an accurate self-understanding and that we happen to live in conformity with this self-understanding in terms of our thoughts, feelings, and actions reflecting or expressing our ‘true self’. In addition, these two conditions need to be connected in the right kind of way. For example, suppose (1) that I have an accurate self-understanding such that I know that being a philosopher is one of my central concerns or comprises a part of my ‘true self’. Suppose also (2) that I live in conformity with this self-understanding, doing all the activities that philosophers typically do. But lastly, suppose (3) that I do not ultimately care about whether (1) or (2) obtains. That is, at the end of the day, it does not ultimately matter to me what kind of person I am and what type of life I lead. What seems to be missing in this case is what Larmore refers to as ‘practical reflection’, which he characterizes as follows:

“For we can turn back upon ourselves, not with the intent of expanding our knowledge, but in order to take an explicit stand, to devote ourselves to beliefs, feelings, or actions that may already be unreflectively ours or that we are now making our own for the first time... [this involves] doing these things in full consciousness of what we are doing and thus assuming responsibility for everything these engagements normally entail.” (2010:24)

Generally speaking, what I am calling ‘self-concern’ here amounts to what Larmore describes as ‘taking a stand’ – that is, where we genuinely commit ourselves to one course of action rather than another, thereby taking responsibility for the activity of constituting ourselves, *via* our choices and actions, into the kind of people we ultimately want to be.

In order to fully appreciate EA, it may be helpful to consider here five paradigmatic examples of *inauthenticity*:

- Shallow:** Abe is a college student who has never considered what he really wants. Instead, he just does what’s expected of him. He pursues a certain career path because his parents want him to, he likes certain styles of music/clothing/etc. because this is what is popular among his peer group, etc.
- Sloth:** Betty is an insurance salesperson, but she recognizes that her real passion in life is to make independent movies. Whenever she thinks about doing so, however, she reflects upon all the difficulties involved – e.g., finding a new job, spending long hours writing screenplays, etc. – and consequently, never takes any action. Not pursuing this aim counts among the biggest regrets of her life.
- Sellout:** Charlie entered law school with the aim of working for a non-profit organization devoted to protecting the environment. Upon graduating,

however, the only jobs available to him are at big corporate law firms, all of which have abysmal environmental track records. After much self-reproach, he takes one of these jobs in order to pay off his large student loans.

**Secretive:** Danielle grew up in the deep South during the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. She had an African-American father and a white mother. Unlike her siblings, she was able to ‘pass’ as white and so did not experience the same type of discrimination they did. Despite feeling conflicted whenever she ‘passed’ – particularly when her siblings were being treated badly in the same situation – she never admitted or owned up to her mixed heritage.

**Self-Deceived:** Ed is a science teacher. He gets cancer and, in order to provide for his family, decides to sell drugs on the side. At the beginning, he sells drugs primarily for this reason. As time goes on, he becomes increasingly motivated out of a desire for power and personal gain. He deceives himself, however, by telling himself that he is ultimately doing this for his family.

In the case of **Shallow**, Abe fails to satisfy the first condition of EA. He lacks an accurate self-understanding, either implicitly or explicitly. Unlike, say, John the non-reflective farmer, Abe would not be able to say what he truly wants without engaging in long, deep reflection. This stands in contrast to the next three cases. These individuals do have an accurate self-understanding. They fail, however, to live in conformity with that self-understanding in various ways. What all three cases have in common is that these people think, feel, or act in ways which, *ex hypothesi*, come at the expense of their true selves. Betty sacrifices her true self for the sake of (1a) comfort or avoiding the pain of failure (**Sloth**), Charlie for the sake of (1b) expedience and short-term financial security (**Sellout**), and Danielle for the sake of (1c) avoiding negative reactions from others (**Secretive**). We can understand (1a)-(1c) in two different ways. Either (1a)-(1c) *are not* related to these individuals’ true selves. Or (1a)-(1c) *are* related to these individuals’ true selves, but they are much less central parts than what is being sacrificed. That is, *ex hypothesi*, we are assuming that (1a)-(1c) comes at the expense of things which these individuals care about more deeply, such as, for Betty, (2a) pursuing something that she is passionate about (**Sloth**); or for Charlie, (2b) remaining true to his ideals (**Sellout**); or for Danielle, (2c) being honest or not ashamed about who she is as a person (**Secretive**). The fifth case, **Self-Deceived**, is more complicated. In some sense, Ed fails on both counts. On the one hand, despite knowing his true motivations, Ed gets himself to believe otherwise. In this way, Ed ultimately lacks an accurate self-understanding. On the other hand, Ed also fails to live in conformity with his accurate self-understanding. In order to be self-deceived, Ed must have possessed some accurate self-understanding to begin with. Nonetheless, he fails to conform to this accurate self-understanding precisely by self-deceptively attempting to undermine his accurate self-understanding itself.

We should emphasize two points here. First, notice that authenticity can come in degrees. Take Charlie. Suppose that the aim of achieving short-term financial security and paying off his student loans is an important concern for him and so comprises a genuine part of his true self. Nonetheless, suppose that he ultimately values protecting the environment more. Thus, by taking the corporate job, he compromises his deeper ideals. In this situation, he acts authentically *to some extent* insofar as he does

genuinely care about financial security. Nevertheless, he acts in a *predominantly* inauthentic way insofar as taking this course of action comes at the expense of what is deeper or more central to who he is as a person. Second, not all cases where we act in shallow or slothful ways, or choose money over other personal ideals, or choose to hide certain aspects of our identity from others, or engage in self-deception are necessarily inauthentic. Rather, it is only when we pursue these aims at the expense of expressing deeper or more central aspects of who we really are as persons that we are being inauthentic or ‘not true to ourselves’.

## 5. Summary

To conclude, I want to highlight three main merits of this account of authenticity. First, EA seems to capture the valid core underlying all conceptions of authenticity – viz., being true to oneself – while at the same time offering some concrete guidance for thinking about the nature of the ‘self’ and for what it even means to be ‘true to oneself’, cashed out in terms of ‘self-understanding’, ‘self-expression’, and ‘self-concern’.

Second, EA helps us to see why it can make sense to talk about authenticity as a kind of virtue. EA helps us to identify, *a la* Aristotle, two main extremes that we can fall prey to when trying to live authentically. On the one hand, we can display (1) the ‘deficiency’ of not caring enough about ourselves as persons, either by (1a) failing to have an accurate self-understanding, (1b) failing to live in conformity with that self-understanding, or (1c) failing to have sufficient self-concern – in particular, concern about what kind of people we are and what type of life we lead. Failing in any of these ways leads to inauthenticity. On the other hand, we can display (2) the ‘excess’ of caring about ourselves as persons too much. This is the type of attitude that most cultural critics of authenticity rightly disparage. We find authenticity described as a ‘megalomania of self-infinitezation’ (Bell), as displaying an egocentric or narcissistic ‘therapeutic mentality’ (Rieff/Lasch), or as involving a kind of ‘competitive self-absorbed individualism’ (Potter).<sup>34</sup> What these critiques fail to recognize is that it seems possible for us to care about who and what we are like as persons in fully virtuous or moderate – as opposed to vicious or excessive – ways. Notice that, strictly speaking, EA does not require *that* we be authentic in this virtuous way. Nonetheless, EA does provide us with the conceptual resources for understanding *how* we can be virtuously authentic, viz., by steering a middle course between the two extremes discussed above.<sup>35</sup>

Third and lastly, following thinkers like Lionel Trilling and Bernard Williams, EA emphasizes the fundamental difference between the ideals of (1) truthfulness, honesty, and sincerity, or *being true to others* and (2) authenticity, or *being true to oneself*.<sup>36</sup> In this way, I argue – contrary to many recent accounts of authenticity – that, if our authentic behavior is virtuous, it is best understood as exemplifying a *personal virtue* (like, e.g., temperance or patience) rather than a *social virtue* (like, e.g., kindness, justice, or compassion). Many contemporary defenders of authenticity endorse a more social account of authenticity, arguing that acting upon one’s authentic desires “...falls within the bounds of social acceptability – that is, that one’s authentic desires are

morally credible” and that “[o]ne’s authentic self points to a way of living that is both distinctively one’s own and socially decent” (Meyers 2000:158); that authenticity “include[s] such crucial elements as emotional attachment in caring and belonging to a community” (Cuypers 2001:150); and that “the concept of authenticity... involve[s] not only the winning of freedom but the respect for freedom, not only the achievement of dignity in the individual but the acceptance of the Kantian maxim of the dignity of all individuals” and that “one cannot imagine an authentic individual who really has no respect for the liberty of others” (Grene 1952:272).

Charles Guignon provides perhaps the most sustained defense of this view. He gives two main arguments. First, drawing on insights from Charles Taylor and Bernard Williams, he argues that because concrete social contexts are necessary for the possibility of authenticity, being authentic requires that we act in ways “aimed at preserving and reinforcing a way of life that allows for such worthy personal life projects as that of authenticity” (2004:162). Second, he discusses examples of presumably inauthentic individuals, e.g., a talented artist committed to making a lot of money “by producing slick, popularized paintings”; a political fanatic who “enthusiastically and unquestioningly supports whoever happens to have political power at any time”; and a social conformist “whose defining life-goal is to always fit in and be as much like everyone else as possible” (2004:157). He argues that these people are inauthentic due to the content of their commitments. For Guignon, this shows that a necessary condition for being authentic is engaging in “an undertaking [that is] really is worthwhile at some level” (2004:158). And such ‘worthwhile’ endeavors ultimately involve “[having] a valuable role to play in society” (2004:161).

I have two main worries about Guignon’s arguments. First, I think we should distinguish here between (1a) acting authentically and (1b) being concerned about preserving the social conditions that sustain authenticity. If authenticity just involves ‘being true to oneself’ as outlined above – in terms of self-understanding, self-expression, and self-concern – then it does not seem that (1a) necessarily entails (1b). That is, it seems that (1a) acting authentically and (1b) striving to promote a society in which authenticity is possible can come apart. Guignon is surely right to argue that pursuing (1b) seems *morally better*, and perhaps even that pursuing (1b) seems *more rational*, at least if we want to avoid acting in self-undermining ways. Nonetheless, it seems mistaken to argue that we must engage in such activities if we want to be authentic *simpliciter*.

Second and more fundamentally, I think that we should distinguish here between (2a) a more formal sense of authenticity, or *authenticity as such*, and (2b) a more substantive sense of authenticity, or what I will call an *authenticity worth having*. In contrast to Guignon, I want to allow for the logical possibility that realizing a person’s ‘true self’ – understood in terms of those concerns which are most central to her personality – could involve engaging in much-less-than-desirable activities, including Guignon’s examples of being a talented artist who only cares about commercial success, being a political fanatic, or even being a social conformist. While these individuals may not display an “authenticity worth having”, they could still be acting authentically in terms of genuinely expressing or conforming to their true selves, however

regrettable we might find such choices to be. Understood this way, it seems that authenticity is merely conditionally valuable, depending upon what the nature of your ‘true self’ happens to be like.

In the end, I argue that authenticity has a mixed value for our lives. On the one hand, following George Kateb, we can categorize authenticity as an ‘existential value’ or a ‘value of identity’, where other such values arguably include autonomy, freedom, equality, honor, etc.<sup>37</sup> Without the presence of such values in our life, it seems we cannot lead fully flourishing human lives, whatever other objective goods we might have in our lives. On the other hand, from a moral point of view, authenticity seems to be only conditionally good – that is, only as good as the nature of the ‘true self’ being expressed by such authentic activity. Ultimately, we should care about the virtue of authenticity insofar as, like the other existential virtues, it counts among those *pro tanto* objective goods which can contribute to our overall well-being and make our lives better off. However, we should recognize with Aristotle that, like all other virtues, the virtue of authenticity requires ‘the unity of the virtues’ in order to be unqualifiedly good.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/nov/30/academicexperts.highereducation>

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of authenticity in the social sciences, see, e.g., Bendix 1997, Miller 1997, Lindholm 2008, and Vannini and Williams 2009; in political theory, see Berman 1970 and Rossinow 1998; in literary and cultural studies, see Trilling 1971, Newman 1997, and Cheng 2004; and in business/marketing, see Boyle 2003, Gilmore and Pine 2007, and Morin 2010.

<sup>4</sup> For some helpful discussion, see Bell 1989, Charme 1991, Golomb 1995, and Malpas and Wrathall 2000.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Frankfurt 1998 and 1999; Velleman 2005; Dworkin 1989; Christman 2009; Meyers 1989 and 2000; Oshana 2005; Williams 2002; Taylor 1989, 1992 and 1994; Appiah 1993, 1996, and 2005; and Larmore 2004.

<sup>6</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601080324,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> My discussion, which contrasts the general 'concept' of authenticity with three popular 'conceptions' of authenticity, follows Rawls' well-known distinction between 'concept' and conception – see Rawls 1971:5.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.visitmaine.com>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.post-gazette.com/breakfast/2011/07/11/Patricia-Sheridan-s-Breakfast-With-Sarah-Ferguson/stories/201107110217>

<sup>10</sup> Young 2012, §164.

<sup>11</sup> <http://money.cnn.com/video/news/2013/06/17/f-leadership-whole-foods-walter-robb-returns.fortune/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.mlive.com/business/index.ssf/2012/08/pure\\_michigan\\_wins\\_more\\_advert.html](http://www.mlive.com/business/index.ssf/2012/08/pure_michigan_wins_more_advert.html)

<sup>13</sup> For some helpful discussions of Rousseau on authenticity, see Ferraro 1993 and O'Hagan 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Interview on *The Bob Edwards Show*, June 7, 2006, on XM Public radio channel 133.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2006/12/outing\\_joe\\_bidens\\_inner\\_bubba.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2006/12/outing_joe_bidens_inner_bubba.html)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/fashion/for-only-the-authentic-cultural-studies.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/fashion/for-only-the-authentic-cultural-studies.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

<sup>17</sup> [http://washingtonexaminer.com/tom-brokaw-al-gore-a-stand-up-comedian-compared-to-inauthentic-mitt-romney/article/2506186?custom\\_click=rss](http://washingtonexaminer.com/tom-brokaw-al-gore-a-stand-up-comedian-compared-to-inauthentic-mitt-romney/article/2506186?custom_click=rss)

<sup>18</sup> <https://thepoliticalcarnival.net/tag/gop-convention/page/9/>

<sup>19</sup> La Rochefocauld, *Maximes*, §431, as quoted in Larmore 2010:28.

<sup>20</sup> For helpful discussion of this issue, see O'Hagan 1999, esp. Chs. 3-4 and 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> Of course, any such declaration would presumably occur in a moment of weakness, given their essential nature as liars.

<sup>22</sup> See Sartre 1984:109-112.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Rubin 1998:109.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Frankfurt 1988 and 1999.

<sup>25</sup> For helpful discussion of these points, see, e.g., Meyers 2000; Arpaly and Schroeder 1999; and Velleman 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Unlike Arpaly and Schroeder 1999:173, who regard 'depth', or firmness or strength, as merely one aspect of being 'well-integrated', I separate these two factors since it seems that, in many cases, they can come apart.

<sup>27</sup> See Larmore 2010, esp. Chs. 1 and 3-6. I am grateful for an anonymous referee for stressing the importance of both Larmore's and Driver's contributions here and for pressing me to defend a more balanced treatment of these two different forms of authenticity.

<sup>28</sup> See Driver 2001, esp. Ch. 2.

<sup>29</sup> See Heidegger 1962:163-168, 293-311, 347-358, and Sartre 1984:96-116.

<sup>30</sup> Rorty and Wong 1990:28

<sup>31</sup> See fn. 1 above.

<sup>32</sup> Maslow 1949. For a helpful discussion of 'expression' in general, see Swanton 2003, Ch. 6.

<sup>33</sup> See Raz 2002:258-260.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Bell 1976; Rieff 1973; Lasch 1979; and Potter 2010. For a helpful discussion of such criticisms, see Ferraro 1993.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful for an anonymous referee for insightful criticisms on an earlier formulation of these claims.

<sup>36</sup> See Trilling 1972 and Williams 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Kateb 2010:12-17, 21-24.