Fight Club as Philosophy: I Am Jack's Existential Struggle

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to analyze the movie *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher, written by Jim Uhls, and first released in the fall of 1999. The movie is based on the homonym novel by Chuck Palahniuk, published in 1996. I will argue that *Fight Club* is to be understood in primarily existentialist, nonethical, and nonevidential terms, showing the struggle felt by each and every one of us to find a convincing answer to the question of what (if anything) counts as an authentic life that is worth living. Moreover, I will argue that the movie does not merely illustrate the struggle and the existential angst it engenders; it also advances, if not strictly speaking a theoretical answer grounded in an indisputable philosophical reasoning, then at least a practical way to face it. It is only after positively endorsing the claim that absolutely nothing (whatever it may be) externally imposed on a person can give their life ultimate meaning that a person is free to engage in a conscious, laborious, and exhausting attempt at self-affirmation, a full and positive endorsement of one's own authenticity.

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Introduction

Fight Club, directed by David Fincher and written by Jim Uhls, was first released in the fall of 1999. The movie is based on the homonym novel by Chuck Palahniuk, published in 1996 by the American publishing company W. W. Norton.[1] Despite initially not meeting the hoped-for box-office sales and receiving mixed criticism (mostly because it can easily be (mis)read as exalting and encouraging men to gratuitous violence), *Fight Club* eventually gained a devoted following. It is now commonly recognized, more than 20 years after its theatrical release, as a cult classic.

Fight Club is centered on the character of the Unnamed Narrator (played by Edward Norton) and how his life dramatically changes after meeting the characters of Marla Singer (played by Helena Bonham-Carter) and Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt). The fact that the protagonist remains unnamed throughout the story reflects the fact that he is depicted as lacking any peculiar traits of his own; he is a bit of a sponge. However, we can call him Jack since – after reading a set of short articles he finds in Tyler's house which are written in the first person from a human organ perspective ("I am Jack's medulla oblongata, without me Jack could not regulate his heart rate, blood pressure or breathing"; "I am Jack's colon . . . I get cancer, I kill Jack") – he does sometimes indirectly refer to himself as "Jack" (e.g., "I am Jack's cold sweat"; "I am Jack's complete lack of surprise").

The movie follows Jack and Tyler as they create Fight Club which, at first, is simply an underground boxing club – an association of men who agree to engage in fights among themselves. As the movie progresses, however, Fight Club evolves – on Tyler's initiative with Jack unaware – into a violent military inspired sectarian group that goes by the name of Project Mayhem. Project Mayhem demands of its members an irrational and blind obedience to Tyler who (we eventually discover) is the split personality of Jack himself. The ultimate purpose of Project Mayhem is to blow up the city's financial district to bring about, in Tyler's words, "the collapse of financial history . . . one step closer to economic equilibrium."

At first, *Fight Club* can be seen as simply the story of a solitary man suffering from a split personality disorder who, fed up with his monotonous life, creates a kind of underground men-only club where he and other disaffected men find relief from their stress by "enjoying" fighting among themselves. The fact that it evolves into Project Mayhem might exemplify their attempt to change their situation by engaging in violent actions of sabotage. But, on a superficial reading, that is as deep as the message might seem to go. Fortunately, *Fight Club* ultimately has a far more interesting philosophical meaning that goes way beyond fighting and its main character's split personality disorder.

My proposal in this chapter is to view *Fight Club* in purely existentialist, nonethical, and nonevidential terms, as a movie that demonstrates the struggle felt by each and every one of us to find a convincing answer to the question of what (if anything) counts as an authentic life that is worth living. The struggle is not ethical but existential in the sense that it is not about deciding what actions are (ethically) right or wrong, but about finding what way of life (if any) counts as an authentic life. In fact, the movie takes special care to detach itself from any purely ethical outlook, offering no real commentary on the morality of the actions described in it. Moreover, I will argue that the movie does not merely illustrate the struggle and the existential angst it engenders; it also advances an answer which, if it is not a strictly speaking theoretical answer grounded in an indisputable philosophical reasoning, is at least a practical way to face it. What is that answer? Embracing the fact that absolutely nothing (whatever it may be) externally imposed onto a person can give ultimate meaning to a person's life. Only then is one free to engage in a conscious, laborious, and exhausting attempt at self-affirmation, a full and positive endorsement of one's own authentic self – *that is*, that which makes a person the individual they are and not another. Ideally, this self-affirming exercise will overcome the existential struggle by resulting in the enjoyment of an authentic, self-governed life that is thus worth living.

Summary of *Fight Club*

At the start of the movie, Jack is caught up in a routine white-collar job in an insurance agency. He suffers from insomnia and is a compulsive shopper, "a slave" he tells us to the "Ikea nesting instinct. If I saw something clever, like a coffee table in the form of yin and yang, I had to have it." After six months without soundly sleeping, Jack goes to the doctor seeking a medical solution (e.g., sleeping pills). The doctor (played by Richmond Arquette) refuses to give him any. Jack begs, saying that he is in pain, but the doctor replies, "You wanna see pain? Swing by First Methodist Tuesday night. See guys with testicular cancer. That's pain."

Jack does, finds the group "Remaining Men Together," and pretends to be suffering from the disease to take part in the meetings. There he meets the character of Robert (Bob) Paulson (interpreted by Meat Loaf), a former champion body-builder. Bob's former steroid use led to his cancer and the removal of his testicles; his medical treatment has caused him to grow large breasts. The kind of attention and emotional support Jack receives brings him relief. "Bob loved me because he thought my testicles were removed too. Being there, pressed against his tits, ready to cry... This was my vacation." Jack's insomnia is cured. "Babies don't sleep this well." He thus becomes a self-confessed therapy group addict, attending meetings for people suffering from diseases of all kinds – from tuberculosis and kidney disease to skin cancer – all while pretending to be as sick as the rest of the participants.

The charade comes to an end, however, with the appearance of Marla Singer. Marla, like Jack, is a "tourist" who goes to therapy groups pretending to be sick.

Although she never publicly exposes Jack's fraud, her presence at the meetings impedes his pretense, ending the relief he gets from the groups. "Marla, the big tourist... Her lie reflected my lie. And suddenly, I felt nothing, I couldn't cry. So, once again, I couldn't sleep." His insomnia returns, as does his incapacity to find any purposefulness or enjoyment in life. "Everywhere I travel, tiny life." On one of his frequent business flights, he laments "Every time the plane banked too sharply on take-off or landing, I prayed for a crash, or a mid-air collision... anything."

On another of those flights, Jack meets Tyler Durden, who introduces himself as a soap salesman. They have a short, rather bizarre chat where Tyler claims that the plane's oxygen masks are there simply to drug passengers in the event of an accident so that they "become euphoric, docile" and more easily accept their fate. He also explains that "One can make all kind of explosives using simple household items." When the plane lands, Jack discovers that the airport security officers have confiscated and turned all his luggage over to the authorities because it was vibrating. "Nine times out of ten," airport security tells him, "it's just an electric razor. But, every once in a while... it's a dildo. Of course, it's company policy never to imply ownership in the event of a dildo. We have to use the indefinite article, 'a' dildo, never 'your' dildo."

Jack's day worsens when he arrives at his apartment building only to discover that his apartment has been destroyed by a gas explosion. With no possessions and nowhere to go, Jack considers phoning Marla, but decides instead to phone Tyler; they meet at a bar later that night. Jack tells Tyler how lost he feels for having suddenly been deprived of all his possessions "I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was so close to being complete." But Tyler criticizes his consumerist behavior, warning that "the things you own end up owning you."

After a few drinks, and now outside the bar, Tyler agrees that Jack can stay at his place, which turns out to be an old, crumbling, abandoned house in the suburbs. But first, Tyler asks Jack to do him a "favor." "I want you to hit me as hard as you can." Tyler overcomes Jack's initial reluctance by persuasively asking, "How much can you know about yourself if you have never been in a fight?" Tyler and Jack then engage in a mutually and freely agreed fight. To Jack's surprise, fighting with Tyler simply for the sake of fighting provides him with some relief, later reflecting that "after fighting, everything else in your life gets the volume turned down."

Over the next few nights, Tyler and Jack fight outside the bar, attracting the attention of other men who want to join in this type of fight. This leads to the creation of Fight Club, which at first is nothing more than a kind of underground club where men of all classes and statuses can find relief from their daily stress by engaging in freely agreed fights among themselves. Despite its first two rules, "You do not talk about Fight Club," Fight Club quickly grows, attracting new members who, fed up with their lives, are looking for a release. One of them is Robert Paulson, from Remaining Men Together. Marla Singer also appears again (although not at Fight Club) and engages in a purely sexual relationship with Tyler.

As Fight Club gets bigger, it becomes what could be deemed a formally organized club under Tyler's exclusive leadership. Tyler not only bestows Fight Club with

some other protocolary rules which all its members must follow when fighting – *for example*, "[If] someone yells stop, goes limp, taps out, the fight is over" – but he also gives members "homework assignments," like start a fight with a total stranger and lose. These "homework assignments" progressively cease to be related to fighting and become more acts of vandalism. At first, they appear to have no ultimate purpose and do not involve extreme violence, like replacing the original airplane safety instruction cards where passengers are smiling with ones that show passengers screaming and thrashing about in terror. But gradually, Fight Club becomes an underground gang devoted to vandalism, with Tyler seeming to have the ability to capture and take advantage of its members' general discontent.

> "I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived. I see all this potential, and I see squandering. God damn it! An entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables, slaves with white collars. Advertisements have us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We are the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, or great depression. Our Great War is a spiritual war. Our great depression... is our lives. We've all been raised by television to believe that one day we'll all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars... but we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off."

To Jack's surprise (because he cannot understand why Fight Club is evolving in this way and is unaware of Tyler's ultimate motivation), Fight Club ends up becoming a kind of militarized underground urban army under Tyler's strict command, headquartered in Tyler's house. "Why was Tyler Durden building an army? To what purpose? To what greater good? In Tyler we trusted." Admission guidelines to the house are strict. "If the applicant waits at the door for three days without food, shelter, or encouragement, then he may enter and begin his training."

Travelling in a car with Tyler and two unnamed members, Jack discovers that Fight Club has officially evolved into Project Mayhem, though neither Tyler nor the two members explain what it is. "The first rule of Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions." In the same scene, Tyler admits to having blown up Jack's apartment to encourage him to "Stop trying to control everything and just let go." This gets Jack to acquiesce to having a car accident so as to have (as Tyler puts it) "a near-life experience." Shortly after, Tyler disappears.

The acts of vandalism carried out by Project Mayhem become increasingly violent, including the use of homemade explosives. During one of these sabotage actions, Robert Paulson is shot in the head and killed by the police. Meanwhile, Jack finds various flight tickets in Tyler's name and realizes that he has been flying to different cities all over the country. Baffled by the situation, Jack decides to go to all the places Tyler has been to. To his surprise, he discovers that "Tyler has been busy setting up franchises [Fight Clubs/Projects Mayhem] all over the country" and that the purpose of Project Mayhem is to blow up the city's entire financial district. "One step closer to economic equilibrium." On his trip, a member mistakes Jack for Tyler. Totally bewildered, Jack goes back to his hotel room where he phones Marla. She calls him by the only name she knows him by: "Tyler Durden, Tyler Durden, you fucking freak!" After hanging up, Tyler suddenly appears in the room and Jack

realizes that he and Tyler are in fact "the same person." Jack faints on the bed and Tyler again disappears.

Jack then goes looking for Marla, declaring his love for her and asking her to go to a safer place where neither he nor Tyler will be able to find her. Jack then unsuccessfully tries to stop Project Mayhem by giving himself up to the police, but even the officers are involved in Project Mayhem. They try to emasculate him by castrating him.

After managing to escape from the police station, and now aware that Tyler's followers are everywhere, Jack attempts to stop Project Mayhem alone. He identifies one of the buildings planned to be destroyed, goes there, and dismantles the bombs. Unfortunately, however, there are other bombs scattered throughout the city's skyscrapers. Tyler appears once again, starting a violent fight with Jack, which ends with Jack unconscious. When he comes round, he is bound and Tyler is standing in front of him, holding a gun in his mouth. Through the window, Jack sees that Marla is being dragged inside the building by some members of Project Mayhem. Jack explicitly refuses Tyler's plan to blow up the city's financial district, and once he realizes that the gun being in Tyler's hand means that it is in his own hand, he takes it and shoots himself in the face. Tyler again disappears, the movie ending shortly afterwards with Tyler (but not Jack) having apparently been killed by the shot, and with Marla and Jack, hand in hand, watching the city's skyscrapers implode.

Interpreting *Fight Club*

Some take the character of Tyler Durden and his rebellion *against* the world to be central to the moral of the movie. As I shall argue here, however, the moral cannot be found in either Tyler or in Fight Club, but instead should be found in Jack's intimate struggle and desperate attempt at self-affirmation.

Tyler-central interpretations of the movie usually echo the speech Tyler gives to the members of Fight Club around the middle of the film. According to Tyler, despite their being "the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived," the members of Fight Club are "squandering" their potential. But it is not their fault. Western societies (and not just capitalism but the lifestyles such societies promote) have trapped us in jobs "pumping gas, waiting tables," making us "slaves with white collars," so that "we can buy shit we don't need." More specifically, western societies have deprived men of their "hunter-gatherer" instinct, reducing them to nothing more than mere "by-products of a lifestyle obsession." As Tyler asks Jack, when they first meet in the bar:

> Do you know what a duvet is? [...] It's a blanket, just a blanket. Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential to our survival in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No. What are we, then? [...] We're consumers, we are by-products of a lifestyle obsession.

According to Tyler, the western contemporary lifestyle has (metaphorically speaking) "emasculated" men by depriving them of their ultimate nature *as men*. Indeed, the theme of emasculation is present very early in the film; the first therapy group Jack attends is for those who suffer from testicular cancer. Jack feels at home among those who have had their testicles actually removed because he feels that his have been metaphorically removed. Like them, he struggles with his masculinity and likely finds their mantras reassuring. "We're still men. Yes, we're men. Men is what we are."

As a replacement for such groups, again on Tyler's understanding, Fight Club is not just a place where men can relieve their daily stress; it is a solemn place where men can rediscover and reconnect with their (allegedly) suppressed natural hunter-gatherer instincts – where they can truly be men. This likely explains why Tyler as a character is attractive to no small part of the audience – and why he (but not Jack) has become a kind of idol in so-called "men's rights activists" circles, and among those who call for a return to men's primitive and (alleged) instinctive way of relating to the world. To them, Jack is just the pretext for Tyler, and it is the latter who is the hero of the film. Indeed, if the hunter-gatherer instinct were, as Tyler claims, the ultimate nature of men, then it would be correct to claim that becoming a member of Fight Club is a kind of self-affirming exercise – a way for men to affirm themselves in what they ultimately are which, under this understanding, is nothing more than aggressive hunter-gatherer animals.

Fortunately, the movie clearly rejects this message and way of conceiving of men. Not only does it clearly label Tyler as the villain by having Jack, at the end of the movie, realize Tyler's treachery and kill him; but the movie takes great pains to show how members of Fight Club are just as alienated as they were before joining (if not more so). They are so alienated, in fact, that they develop an irrational obedience to Tyler – one so blind that they join Project Mayhem and gladly embrace a denial of their own individuality and authenticity. ("In Project Mayhem we have no names"; "In Tyler we trust"; "You are not special. You are not a beautiful or unique snowflake. You're the same decaying organic matter as everything else.") It is one thing to recognize that society or capitalism or your mother has exaggerated how special and unique you are; but Tyler dehumanizes the subjects of Project Mayhem to the point that they do not even value their own life.

Joining Fight Club is not, then, the way to enjoy an authentic, self-governed life, and joining Project Mayhem does not free one from the threats that motived Jack to take refuge in support groups, Tyler, and Fight Club in the first place. For example, the film makes explicitly clear that the threat of emasculation under Project Mayhem is far more severe than the one posed by western capitalistic societies. Capitalism just emasculates Jack metaphorically. But when Jack goes to the police, to try to stop Project Mayhem, and finds that the police officers are themselves members, their emasculation attempt is literal. As they put it to Jack: "You said if anyone even interferes Project Mayhem, even you, we gotta get his balls." Even loyal members of Project Mayhem are in danger. Tyler has not freed them; he has taken advantage of them, turning them into "space monkeys," ready to be sacrificed for what he sees as "the greater good."

What's more, the goal of Project Mayhem – what Tyler sees as "the greater good" – is not laudable. Don't get me wrong; in its early days, Fight Club had no such greater good in mind. Prior to Fight Club evolving into Project Mayhem, Tyler's speeches are just angry outbursts, emotional expressions of discontent against the world that lack any ultimate purpose apart from expressing this discontentment. The same is true of Fight Club's early vandalism "homework assignments." Changing the airplane safety cards and making hundreds of pigeons defecate on the automobiles parked outside a luxury car company may express a kind of frustration that many viewers resonated with, but they are not serious attempts to change the world. Project Mayhem, however, is something much more serious. It is not involved in just childish vandalism; its material concrete purpose is to blow up the entire financial district to erase everyone's credit card debt.

Now, given the wealth disparity that exists in the west (which has grown exponentially since the 1999 release of *Fight Club*), one might think that having everyone "go back to zero" is a laudable goal. Indeed, given the communistic nature of the commune that Tyler creates with Project Mayhem, one might think its goal is one of total equality. Perhaps he is shooting for a kind of Marxian utopia where each person works according to his ability, and each person receives according to his needs. But after the car-crash scene, in which the existence of Project Mayhem is first revealed, Tyler makes clear that the goal of Project Mayhem is nothing of the sort. It is instead complete anarchy.

> "In the world I see, you are stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sea Towers. And when you look down, you'll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison on the empty carpool lane of some abandoned superhighway."

According to Tyler, for men to truly return to their (supposed) primitive hunter-gather instincts, they must return to a primitive hunter-gatherer society.

Initially, one may suspect that this sort of hunter-gatherer society would actually be an improvement, perhaps facilitating the concrete individual to enjoy an authentic, self-affirming life. But a few moments of reflection reveals that it would be nothing of the sort; every moment of life in such a world would be a struggle to survive; one's existence would be constantly threatened by the elements and others. As the philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously put it, "Life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Indeed, Tyler himself is a bit of a hypocrite for desiring it. After every Fight Club meeting, he calls for himself or someone else to be sent to the hospital – but there would be no hospitals in Tyler's "utopia." It would be a world in which a sprained ankle is a death sentence. This is one of the reasons Jack so passionately tries to foil Tyler's plan once he discovers it, and why the attentive viewer should realize that Tyler is the villain.

Besides this view of *Fight Club,* which exalts the character of Tyler and his conceiving of men as aggressive, primitive hunter-gatherer animals, the movie has received other interpretations. For example, it has been interpreted as a critique of

gender issues (see, e.g., Bainbridge and Yates 2005) and as a critique of consumerism and the "American dream" (see, e.g., Lizardo 2007). To be fair, these reading do have merit. For example, there is an obvious rejection of consumerism as a successful way of living a fulfilling life; we see it in how pathetic the "Ikea nesting instinct" is portrayed ("I flip through catalogues and wonder: 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'"), in Tyler's early warning to Jack ("The things you own end up owning you"), and in his direct message to the audience: "You are not your job, you're not how much money you have in the bank. You are not the car you drive, you're not the contents of your wallet. You are not your fucking khakis."

There is also a clear rejection of the kind of masculinity portrayed in men's underwear ads that is made explicit in Jack's words after seeing a Gucci ad on the bus. "I felt sorry for guys who packed into gyms, trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should. That's what a man looks like?" Tyler's jocular rejoinder is even more revealing: "Self-improvement is masturbation. Now Self-destruction . . ." Even more relevant, although perhaps more subtle, is the fact that, aside from Marla Singer, the only secondary character in the movie that takes on a relevant role is Robert Paulson, a man whose testicles have been removed due to testicular cancer and who has developed women's breasts after undergoing medical treatment for the disease and yet whose manliness is never called into question.

God's Salvation is also rejected. This, while not explicitly relevant in the movie, does implicitly make the certainty of earthly death so evincing that life cannot be sustained on anything ultimate, anything different from life itself. ("We don't need [God]! Fuck Damnation, man! Fuck Redemption! We are God's unwanted children? So be it! [...] First, you have to give up. First you have to know, not fear, know, that someday you're gonna die").

So consumerism, the masculinity portrayed in men's underwear ads, and religion are all rejected by the movie as successful answers to the existential struggle. However, they are not criticized because of their (alleged) inherent inadequacy when it comes to living a fulfilled life. Rather, they are rejected as being external ideals of what a man (indeed a person) should be, or more specifically what enables a person to enjoy an authentic life that is worth living. The lesson is that things that are alien to a person, the concrete subject, inevitably lead one to a denial of their own authenticity. To be sure, anticapitalists will readily agree with the way consumerism is portrayed in the movie; feminists, for their part, will agree with rejecting the kind of masculinity depicted in men's underwear ads; and atheists will gladly share the denial of God's Salvation. But the film has absolutely no reference to economics, or to patriarchy, or to the lack of evidential justification for adopting a religious stance. The emphasis, on the contrary, is on how uncritically relying on these externally imposed values ends up diminishing the individual's authenticity, thus impeding them from living a potentially self-governed life. As an example, body-building could be a way to fulfill your life if it is what *you* consciously and sincerely want to do, but it is not if you engage in it just to mold yourself into Calvin Klein's ideal of what an "authentic" man looks like.

The focus of Fight Club is not, then, on rejecting religion, Tyler's way of conceiving men, consumerism, or the masculinity portrayed in men's underwear

ads. Rather, it is centered around Jack (recall he is never actually given a name) and his evolving attitude as he attempts to fill the existential void he feels. Ultimately, the movie portrays how its unnamed narrator is moved to a conscious and exhausting self-affirming exercise, a full endorsement of his own authenticity. And he does so once he realizes the need to reject all the externally imposed conceptions of what counts as a meaningful life, and after coming to not merely stoically resign himself to it, but to positively endorse the claim that since these answers are external to him, they cannot but block his own authenticity and thus prevent him from attaining an authentic, self-governed life.

We can see this in Jack's evolving attitude throughout the movie. Near the start of the movie, Jack is moved by the "Ikea nesting instinct." The lack of meaning this gives him makes him restless, leading to him to seek relief in his "addiction" to therapy groups. Marla ruining this marks the appearance of the character of Tyler, who positively affirms the unnecessariness of finding an ultimate meaning to one's life. ("I say 'Never be complete'; I say 'Stop being perfect'; I say 'Lets evolve, let the chips fall where they may'.") Tyler and Jack together create Fight Club, which at first seems to give Jack relief again (even, perhaps ironically, giving Jack's life some sort of purpose). ("Fight Club became the reason to cut your hair short or trim your fingernails.") Jack even starts to progressively mimic Tyler's attitude, and he gradually slips away from the kind of life he had been immersed in before meeting Tyler. The death of the character of Robert (Bob) Paulson, however, together with his loving relationship with the character of Marla Singer, makes Jack realize that Tyler is not someone he should follow – Tyler's way is not the way to enjoy an authentic life. In fact, emulating him is a complete denial of his own authenticity. "Little by little, you're just letting yourself become Tyler Durden." Jack subsequently engages in a conscious and exhausting attempt at self-affirmation, at fully endorsing his (and not Tyler's) authenticity. This self-affirming exercise is illustrated not only by his effort to purge Tyler from his psyche, but also by his rejection of Fight Club and its corollary, Project Mayhem. This exercise dramatically culminates in the last scene of the movie. Just before shooting himself in the face to "kill" Tyler, Jack claims, "I do [take responsibility]. I am responsible for all of it and I accept that. [...] Tyler, I'm grateful to you, for everything you've done for me. But this is too much. I don't want this. [...] Tyler, I want you to really listen to me: 'My eyes are open'."

Jack's attitude in the final scene contrasts starkly with his reaction in the chemical burning scene, where he is incapable of assuming his own suffering and tries to take refuge in his imagination. ("I'm going to my cave! I'm going to my cave! I'm gonna find my power animal!") The self-shooting metaphorically illustrates how Jack is no longer taking refuge in any external "power animal," be it therapy groups, Fight Club, Tyler, or whatever else is externally imposed on him. Instead, he is now aiming at a self-governed life. (It is interesting to note, however, that despite Tyler assuring Jack that "in the end you will thank me," the movie does not overtly claim the success of Jack's self-affirming exercise in overcoming the existential struggle.)

Indeed, Tyler is nothing but another of Jack's external "power animals" in which he attempts to take refuge. This is consistent with Tyler simply being a product of Jack's imagination, since the movie clearly portrays them as two completely

different, and in the end mutually exclusive, characters. Indeed, the fact that they are so obviously not the same character is what facilitates the transformation Jack undergoes after meeting (and progressively mimicking) Tyler. Moreover, it explains why, for most viewers, Jack's realization that Tyler is just a fictional product of his mind is an unexpected plot twist, despite the movie being littered with clues to this effect. The main purpose of Tyler being Jack's fictional idea, it seems, is to emphasize that the quest for an authentic life that is worth living is a continuous, laborious, and intimate struggle that one must face on their own. The struggle is an individual issue and what is required to resolve it is a conscious exercise of self-affirmation, of realizing and embracing what we want, and what kind of individual we are, regardless of how the world is or what it asks us to be. This clearly contrasts not only with Tyler's attitude but also that of the members of Fight Club/Project Mayhem. They see their life as a struggle against the world; that is why they think that the answer to their problem requires a change in the world (i.e., Project Mayhem), rather than a change in themselves.

In other words, *Fight Club*'s message is that the struggle to find meaning in one's existence, to live an authentic life that is worth living – what (for reasons that will soon be made clear) we will call "the existential struggle" – is *a struggle against (and for) oneself*, to resist how the world asks us to be while attempting to affirm ourselves in what we actually are. It is not *a struggle against (and for) the world*, an attempt to change how the world actually is or how it asks us to be. As mentioned before, what stops Tyler and his followers from engaging in an exercise of self-affirmation is that they conceive of their lives as a struggle *against the world*, which is why they think the answer to their own situation requires a change in the world. However, as illustrated by Jack's evolving transformation, the movie is clear in arguing that the struggle to find an authentic life that is worth living is an individual and intimate issue, and so resolving it requires a conscious exercise of self-affirmation, of realizing what individuals we are and what we want no matter how the world actually is or how it asks us to be. This is not to say, of course, that one may not attempt to change the world if one thinks it is apt for some given reason, just as Jack attempts to stop Project Mayhem. The claim is that, even if these changes in the world were to be successfully made, the world would not provide an answer to one's own intimate existential struggle, because it is external to the subject.

At this point, an obvious question arises. If the claim that frames the entire movie is that an authentic life is a fully self-governed life, then why do men engage in a club that demands obedience to its norms? Interestingly, at the inception of Fight Club, before the preparations for Project Mayhem begin, there seems to be no *strict* requirement to obey the rules. If we focus on its first two rules, which are really only one (i.e., "You do not talk about Fight Club"), it is evident that they are not respected. Fight Club spreads throughout the entire country and sees an exponential growth in its number of members. "I see a lot of new faces. Which means a lot of people have been breaking the first two rules of Fight Club." However, it is evident that members of Fight Club end up developing an irrational and blind obedience to Tyler, even to the point that they gladly assume a denial of their own authenticity. This is simply an ironic way of once again expressing the claim that no uncritical

engagement in any externally imposed way of life can lead to an authentic, self-governed life. Not only are members of Fight Club as alienated as they were before entering the Club, they are not even substantially different from the way Jack is at the beginning of the movie – it is just that, instead of being driven by the "Ikea nesting instinct" and hiding away in therapy groups, they are drawn along by Tyler's instinct and are hiding in Fight Club. Those who follow Tyler are not facing the existential struggle; they are cowardly hiding from it by endorsing Tyler's understanding of life, even when this requires them to reject their own authenticity. ("Sooner or later, we all become what Tyler wanted us to be.") This explains why Jack needs to distance himself from Fight Club and Tyler's Project Mayhem to fully endorse his authenticity.

Another question that arises is, why all the fighting? If the point is to illustrate that no engagement in any externally imposed way of life can lead to a life worth living, then why does the movie get into Fight Club instead of, for example, simply staying with the therapy groups of the beginning of the movie. One answer, of course, is that fighting provides a way to illustrate, and later on reject, Tyler's understanding of men as aggressive hunter-gatherer animals. But there are also two other explanations as to why the movie revolves around fighting. First, fighting provides a vivid, visual metaphor of the grievous and exhausting struggle that each one of us intimately faces when seeking an authentic life. Second, while the members of therapy groups are moved by mutual compassion and pity, members of Fight Club are moved by a feeling of camaraderie. In Fight Club, all men are treated equally and, most importantly, they see themselves as absolute equals. This is, I think, one of the most intelligent and subtle points of the movie: That camaraderie, when misunderstood as total equality among individuals, can generate a denial of each one's authenticity.

If nothing externally imposed on the subject can give their life a meaning, a first reaction may be self-isolation. The movie rejects this possibility, as shown by the fact that what marks Jack's detachment from Tyler and Fight Club are, first, his refusal to endorse Tyler and the other members of Fight Club's indifference to Robert Paulson's death ("You want an omelette? You gotta break some eggs"); and second, his full endorsement of his loving feeling towards the character of Marla Singer – feelings that he insincerely denies throughout the movie. As Jack puts it:

> The full extent of our relationship wasn't really clear to me up until now, for reasons I'm not going to go into, but the important point is that I know I haven't been treating you so well. [...] I'm trying to tell you that I'm sorry, because I've come to realize that I really like you, Marla. [...] I really do, I care about you and I don't want anything bad to happen to you because of me.

A loving involvement with others is not then, by itself, a diminishment of one's own authenticity. Rather, the problem arises when the others are seen as "power animals," as answers to one's own existential struggle. Here it is useful to contrast Jack's attitude towards the character of Marla at the end of the movie with his early "addiction" to therapy groups. Whereas Jack's attitude towards Marla constitutes an

exercise in self-affirmation, a full endorsement of his own feelings, his involvement in therapy groups is no more than an (unsuccessful) attempt to fill his life using deceit (and self-deceit), by pretending to be someone else.

The Moral of *Fight Club*

The ultimate philosophical meaning, or moral, of *Fight Club*, then, is the illustration of the struggle felt by each and every one of us in needing to find a convincing answer to the question of what (if anything) counts as an authentic life that is worth living. What's more, it also claims that all those who hide from the struggle by uncritically relying on external answers end up giving up their authenticity, that which makes them the individuals they are and not others, thus inevitably becoming trapped in an alienated, unauthentic, and self-denying life.

At this stage, I would like to emphasize the point I raised at the beginning: That *Fight Club* is to be understood in primarily existentialist, nonethical, and non-evidential terms. The question of what (if anything) counts as an authentic life that is worth living is not a strange question; indeed, it is one that absolutely everyone faces – hence, why the movie takes care not to present Fight Club as a peculiar extravagancy of Tyler and Jack's, but as an appealing activity for men who are trying to confront their own existential struggle. Consider Jack's claim, after the creation of Fight Club, that "It was right in everyone's face, Tyler and I just made it visible. It was on the tip of everyone's tongue, Tyler and I just gave it a name." Consider Tyler's words to Jack in the car-crash scene. ("You are missing the point, this [Fight Club/Project Mayhem] does not belong to us. We are not special.")

What I mean when I say that the moral should not be understood in "evidential terms" is that the existential struggle is not a theoretical question to be solved through purely theoretical, armchair reasoning, or by appealing to our empirical knowledge about some given facts of the world. Instead, it is something that requires a practical, attitudinal, and conscious engagement on our part. As I said before, the struggle is an individual issue, the answer to which should spring from the concrete individual, independently of how the world is or how it asks us to be. This point is illustrated throughout the movie in Jack's evolving transformation: The world itself does not change in any relevant sense, but the way he sees and approaches the world constantly does. "[After Fight Club we] all started seeing things differently, everywhere we went, we were seizing things up"; "When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. Afterwards, we all felt saved."

Moreover, when stating that it is not an ethical but an existential question, I also mean that the struggle is not about finding what actions are (ethically) right or wrong, but about finding what way of life (if any) counts as an authentic, worth living one. The movie offers no real commentary on the morality of the actions described in it.

Thus, even if it is clear to all of us that crashing your car, as Tyler does, just to have a near-death experience and discover what it feels like to have a car accident is not a good idea, it is still hard to argue that it constitutes an ethically wrong action – provided, of course, that it is a voluntary action and no third parties are injured. In

fact, one of the most interesting aspects of the movie is that it explicitly detaches from any purely ethical outlook. Hence, although fighting is evidently a physically harmful activity, in the movie is it shown to be a freely and mutually agreed activity among the members of the Club, who are all adults and taken to be in full use of their cognitive capacities. (Even Jack and Tyler seem fully capable of reasoning despite their being the same physical person.) Therefore, in principle, there seems to be no ethical reason to object to it – unless, of course, we have an ethical reason to deem boxing and other similar activities as immoral. But, again, engaging in fighting for the sole purpose of fighting would, to most of us, be questionable.

Furthermore, the kind of sabotage actions carried out by the members of Fight Club (dictated by Tyler and taken as their "homework assignments") are, especially at the beginning, at most symbolic, and at worst simply childish. These actions are not attempts to seriously injure anyone, and in fact the only victim involved is the character of Robert Paulson, whose death is portrayed as accidental – "We had it all worked out, Sir. It went smooth until... They shot Bob...They shot him in the head... Those fucking pigs!" – even though Jack is clearly and understandably indignant. ("You morons! You're running around in ski masks, trying to blow things up, what did you think was gonna happen?") Even the final sabotage action, which ends up destroying most of the financial district of the city, is explicitly planned so as nobody gets physically injured ("The buildings are empty. Security and maintenance are all our people. We're not killing anyone, man, we're setting them free!"). But, again, even conceding that no serious harm is done in these actions, I hope we would all agree that engaging in sabotage actions just to express your dislike of the economic system in which you live, or destroying almost all the skyscrapers in your city as a way of moving the whole world to a sort of paleolithic hunter-gatherer society, is not a very praiseworthy way of behaving.

Tyler's violent threats to the character of Raymond K. Hessel (played by Joon B. Kim) to force him to pursue his *own* vital goals (i.e., to complete his veterinary studies) may portray Tyler not just as an unappealing or even repellent character, but also as an ethically blameful one – after all, Raymond did not ask for any help and he clearly did not deserve to be threatened with death for having dropped out of college. While I obviously agree that going through grocery stores, in real life, aiming a gun at employees to force them to fulfill their own life-goals and succeed in becoming "what they wanted to be" is not a good thing, I also think that to take the scene literally, as praising Tyler's violence, would be to miss the point – not only of the scene but also the entire movie. Nowhere else in the movie than in this scene is the claim that underpins *Fight Club* so explicitly stated: That all those who hide themselves from the existential struggle by uncritically relying on external answers (whatever they may be, from consumerism and therapy groups to fight clubs and Tylers) end up giving up their own authenticity, that which makes them the individuals they are and not others. It is in this sense that they are (metaphorically speaking, of course) already dead.

Within this framework, Raymond is already a sort of living dead man, making Tyler's threats appear to be somehow vacuous, not only because the gun is in fact not loaded, but most importantly because someone who is already dead cannot be killed.

At most, Tyler will motivate him (again, metaphorically speaking) to re-engage with life by moving him to realize the need to engage in a conscious self-affirming exercise and to pursue his own goals. This is the metaphorical context in which the scene is framed, explaining why despite Tyler's violence, the scene is commonly taken as ultimately motivational. However, as already stated, this is obviously a fictional context purporting to metaphorically illustrate an existential claim, not an ethical reasoning to justify the audience going through real life aiming guns at people.

There is also another interesting but not immediately obvious aspect to the scene, noticed by William Irwin (2013, 682–683): Tyler calls Raymond by his name. This is interesting for two reasons. First, because there are only three other characters who are called by their name in the whole film: Tyler Durden, Marla Singer, and Robert (Bob) Paulson. Second, because it is in stark contrast to Tyler's attitude towards the members of Project Mayhem. He treats them as nameless "space monkeys." Members of Project Mayhem become annulled as individuals once they make Tyler their cult leader and thereby uncritically assume Tyler's way of self-affirmation through Project Mayhem. In contrast, Tyler encourages Raymond to pursue an authentic, self-governed life by forcing him to focus on his own life goals no matter what ("No fear. No distractions. The ability to let that which does not matter truly slide"). In fact, while Tyler forces Raymond to question himself so that he can find his own, unique way of attaining an authentic existence ("What did you wanted to be, Raymond K. Hessel?"), he explicitly tells members of Project Mayhem to not ask any questions at all ("The first rule of Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions"). The contrast serves to illustrate, once again, the claim that members of Project Mayhem are as alienated as they were before joining the club.

Evaluating *Fight Club*'s Moral

If we turn to the History of Philosophy, the ultimate philosophical meaning or argument of *Fight Club* recognized above may be easily recognized in the works of the philosophers traditionally labeled under the term "existentialism,"[2] which is generally known for the struggle of seeking a convincing answer to the question of what (if anything) counts as an authentic life that is worth living. It is generally considered to suggest that an authentic life requires a practical, attitudinal, and conscious exercise of self-affirmation on our part. To this effect, in her essay *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Beauvoir 1948/1976), the existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) argued that "the genuine man will not agree to recognize any foreign absolute" (Beauvoir 1948/1976, 14). According to Beauvoir, there is no already given external power that may give meaning to our own concrete existence. We are free in the sense that we are not dependent upon anything external and already given. "Man," writes Beauvoir, "bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed, and his victories as well. God can pardon, efface and compensate. But if God does not exist, man's faults are inexpiable" (Beauvoir 1948/1976, 16). On this understanding,

an authentic life requires us to affirm ourselves in our own freedom by taking full responsibility for our own concrete existence once the claim that there is nothing external that can give our life an ultimate meaning has been embraced. Existentialism, however, includes a large group of philosophers: Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936), Paul Tillich (1886–1965), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Jean Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Albert Camus (1913–1960), just to name a few. And they all defended different, and sometimes even opposing, philosophical claims.

This raises the question of whether Existentialism should be taken, properly speaking, as a school of thought with its own core philosophical claims. Instead, perhaps it should be conceived of more vaguely, as simply a peculiar understanding of Philosophy's ultimate task and, more especially, to a particular understanding of each one's own concrete existence. In any case, the label "Existentialism" seems justified in that, despite defending different philosophical claims, these philosophers all have in common a focus on the concrete subject and how they may attain a meaningful existence. More concretely, they agree that the concrete subject should face the intimate struggle of discovering what an authentic life that is worth living consists in, and aim at it through an individual act of self-affirmation. Where they largely differ is in both their understanding of this self-affirmation exercise and its consequences, the kind of way of life that is taken to follow from it.

To illustrate the differences among the philosophers usually labeled as existentialists, first take Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1887/1989). He suggests that the Christian way of life is something unnatural and life-denying, insofar as it goes against the (alleged) most basic and natural tendency to increase one's own power. Contrast that with Miguel de Unamuno's defense of Christian faith, in *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations* (Unamuno 1913/1972), as being the result of a similar (alleged) most basic and natural tendency to increase one's own authenticity. Whereas for Nietzsche an exercise of self-affirmation implied the dismissal of a Christian way of life, for Unamuno it was just the opposite, arguing that a Christian way of life was a life-affirming exercise, something we are led to once we affirm ourselves in our own natural condition.[3]

In this regard, it is interesting to note that *Fight Club* – despite clearly illustrating the need of each person to engage in an intimate and continuous exercise of self-affirmation to overcome their own existential angst and aim at the enjoyment of a self-governed, authentic life – does not, and neither does it attempt to, illustrate what kind of life may follow from such a self-affirmation exercise. Neither does it comment on whether a fully self-governed life may in the end actually be attainable in its totality. In fact, as mentioned previously, despite Tyler ensuring Jack that "in the end you will thank me," the movie does not overtly claim Jack's success in his self-affirming exercise of overcoming the existential struggle he feels, or state what kind of life he is going to be immersed in from thereon, since the movie ends immediately after the self-shooting/building collapsing scene, leaving the spectator with questions about what will happen next.

Strictly speaking, the focus of *Fight Club* is not, then, the illustration, under a fictional scenario, of the philosophical claims already made by some given

existentialist philosopher. Rather its focus is illustrating, through the character of Jack, the intimate existential struggle we all, men and women, suffer from in some way or another, and pointing out that the only way to overcome this struggle is to require an individual and conscious exercise of self-affirmation. It is in this sense that the movie cannot be credited as a sort of, so to speak, instruction manual on how this self-affirming exercise should be executed, or what its results may be. Rather, it leaves spectators with the task of facing their own struggle by their own means, inciting them to discover by themselves, alone, how to assume their own, unique authenticity.

Far from being a defect, this aspect of the film is actually one of its merits. *Fight Club* clearly succeeds in capturing the general outlook of existentialist philosophers without explicitly committing itself to the truth of any philosophical claim already made by some concrete philosopher. And this is why, at least in the interpretation given in this chapter, the movie has the highly valuable merit of introducing the audience to the general stance of existentialist philosophy without encouraging, let alone forcing, the spectator to accept any already given concrete, systematically developed philosophical claim.

Nonetheless, the question may still arise as to whether it is reasonable to claim that a self-governed, authentic life requires of an act of self-affirmation. Moreover, it may be wondered whether it is reasonable to claim that nothing externally imposed on the subject can make their life worth living since, being external, they will result in the denial of one's own authenticity. Taken as such, these claims are vague enough (though, I think, still philosophically inspiring) to be uncontroversial. A controversy would arise if it attempted to define how such self-affirmation may occur and what kind of life may emerge from it, but, again, the movie remains silent in this regard and leaves spectators with the task of finding by themselves, alone, the answer to their own existential struggle. In this respect, I would say that no one, philosophers and nonphilosophers alike, would deny that an authentic, self-governed life requires of an individual an exercise of self-affirmation – even if, again, there is no clear account of what this affirmation may consist in or whether it may in the end actually be possible to fully attain. This seems to just be a conceptual point. Consider Plato's cave allegory, where people sit, chained but contented to watch shadows on a wall, thinking they are real. It may be that the lives of those who live inside the cave are far more comfortable in terms of the facilities they may have access to than the lives of those who live outside; it may even be that, at least with regard these facilities, life inside the cave may be *preferable* to life on the outside. But even if so, it still seems conceptually wrong to claim that those living inside the cave, however many facilities they may be able to enjoy, are enjoying an authentic, self-governed life.

Of course, a quick glance at any textbook on the History of Philosophy will reveal that not all philosophers are labeled as existentialists; but this is not because only the thinkers labeled as existentialists agree on the subjective significance of having an answer to the question of what (if anything) counts as an authentic life that is worth living. Rather, the difference has to do with how different philosophers conceive of Philosophy as a discipline. Whereas existentialist philosophers claim that Philosophy's ultimate task is to answer the question of what (if anything) counts

as an authentic life that is worth living, nonexistentialist philosophers do not consider this to be the basic, fundamental question which Philosophy, as a discipline, should deal with; they may even take it to be a subjective, private question that is unanswerable in a rational, objective philosophical way. However, and again this is the ultimate philosophical point raised by *Fight Club*, no-one denies that each concrete individual, be they a philosopher or not, needs to find an answer to the question of what an authentic life consists in. And many agree that by uncritically relying on externally imposed views and practices, a person can end up trapped in an alienated way of life.

Conclusion

Fight Club is not a boxing movie. Rather, it is an angsty movie, which conveys an inciting philosophical message, which is that an authentic life that is worth living seems to require a conscious and exhausting attempt at self-affirmation, to fully endorse one's own (and not other's) authenticity. The *how* of such self-affirmation is left open. Jack's, not Tyler's, "homework assignment" is to leave the spectators with the task of facing their own struggle by their own means, encouraging them to discover by themselves alone how to assume their own, unique authenticity.

Notes

1. In this essay, I will leave aside Palahniuk's novel and focus exclusively on Fincher's movie, so I will not be commenting on the movie's degree of fidelity to the novel, or whether they may admit different interpretations.
2. For a short and accessible introduction to Existentialism, see Flynn 2006.
3. For a detailed account as to why Unamuno considered his notion of religious faith to be an exercise of self-affirmation, and why it can be considered as a convincing response to Nietzsche's criticisms of the Christian, agapeic way of life, see Oya 2020.

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