**Abstract**

Drawing on contemporary agency theory and the phenomenological-existential tradition, this paper uses Mr. Stevens, the narrator-butler of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, to examine the interplay and potential tensions between different aspects (and thus different standards) of human agency. Highlighting the problem of mission creep described by John Martin Fischer, in which a notion expands beyond the original purpose, I use Stevens’s thoughts on dignity to outline three different ways actions can (or can fail to) trace back to agents—autonomy as self-control, authenticity as sincerity, and authenticity as ownership. I then propose that the way Stevens embraces and acts consistently within his subservient professional role (autonomy as self-control) weakens his ability to take responsibility for his life in the sense required by authenticity as ownership. Because the self-responsibility of authenticity requires normative flexibility (the ability to revise and reshape one’s commitments and values), when normatively inflexible agents act in self-controlled ways according to their roles or welfare standards, they may limit their ability to take responsibility for their lives. In addition to illuminating debates about whether robust human agency is compatible with subservience, the normative flexibility involved in authenticity has implications for human agency more broadly.

**Why Did the Butler Do It?**

**Justin F. White**

**1. Introduction**

Toward the end of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The* *Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens, a traditional English butler out of place in 1954, compares himself unfavorably to his former employer, Lord Darlington. Though Stevens thinks great gentlemen influence history in ways service professionals generally cannot,[[1]](#endnote-1) Stevens’s negative comparison hinges on something else. Despite Darlington’s problematic involvement with the Nazi party prior to World War II and his causeless dismissal of Jewish employees, Stevens remarks:

He [Darlington] wasn’t a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, *he chose it,* he can say that at least. (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 243)

Stevens is less charitable toward himself:

As for myself, I cannot even claim that [I chose a path in life]. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship’s wisdom. All those years I served him. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really—one has to ask oneself—what dignity is there in that? (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 243)

Despite Darlington’s moral failings, what Stevens claims separates Darlington from himself is that Darlington *chose* his own path in a way that allowed him to say that *he made his own mistakes*.[[2]](#endnote-2) By contrast, Stevens *trusted*, specifically in Darlington’s wisdom, in a way that (he claims) makes his mistakes not fully his own.

Of course, Stevens’s claim that he did not choose his life (and so did not make his own mistakes) could simply be an attempt to deflect responsibility, to minimize his complicity in Darlington’s reprehensible pursuits—it was Stevens, after all, who actually dismissed the Jewish employees. One could thus see Stevens’s claim as what Harry Frankfurt (1988) calls “shabbily insincere devices for obtaining unmerited indulgence” (p. 63). But what if Stevens’s claim is not merely an attempt to evade responsibility, but is also “genuinely descriptive” (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 63)? Because Stevens did choose his life path in some straightforward sense—indeed, not only chose but embraced it—what could his claim to not have chosen his life reveal about his agency or his experience of his agency?

Although the philosophy of agency literature has largely developed around the question of moral responsibility, the focus sometimes shifts or expands (not always explicitly) from the conditions of moral responsibility to something more—or at least different. John Martin Fischer (2012) uses “mission creep” to describe Frankfurt’s own shift from “specify[ing] the notion of freedom that is necessary and sufficient for moral responsibility” to his later work on identification, which seems to go beyond the conditions of moral responsibility (p. 166). When such mission creep occurs, Fischer cautions, we can problematically lump together relevantly dissimilar phenomena.

This paper uses Stevens as an extended case study in order to examine the interplay and potential tensions between different aspects (and thus different standards) of human agency and better see how the same action can satisfy some standards of human agency while falling short of others. Stevens’s claim to not have chosen his life is striking partly because it comes at the end of a novel in which he consistently, sometimes jarringly, emphasizes that he successfully performed his duties with the “dignity in keeping with his position” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 169). But precisely in this way, Stevens (unintentionally) shows how the very self-control that allows one to act according to one’s adopted role can impede one’s ability to take ownership (or responsibility) for one’s life, which requires normative flexibility—an openness to changing or revising one’s roles, commitments, and values.

Because Stevens describes not choosing his life in terms of a lack of dignity, section 2 examines Stevens’s treatment of dignity.[[3]](#endnote-3) On closer examination, Stevens uses “dignity” in two senses—hereafter Dignity1 and Dignity2—and although Dignity1 figures more prominently in the narrative, when he claims to not have chosen his life path near the novel’s end, he is criticizing his own lack of Dignity2. Given Stevens’s role and the way he understands it, by being a butler of Dignity1—performing (what he sees as) his professional duties—Stevens impedes his Dignity2, which involves making his own mistakes or, more generally, taking ownership for his actions.

In section 3, I draw on contemporary agency theory and the phenomenogical-existential tradition to develop Stevens’s discussions of Dignity1 and Dignity2 and distinguish three agential standards that track different ways one can (fail to) relate to one’s actions—autonomy as self-control, authenticity as sincerity, and authenticity as ownership.[[4]](#endnote-4) One can (fail to) act according to one’s adopted roles or principles (autonomy as self-control). One can also find oneself in and act according to roles or identities that (do not) reflect one’s core desires, cares, or values (authenticity as sincerity). One can also (fail to) take ownership or responsibility for one’s character, identity, and actions (authenticity as ownership). Stevens illustrates how these can come apart and someone can meet one standard while falling short of another.

However, because Stevens is a butler—what one might see as a paradigmatically servile role—one could think that this framework and the agential tensions Stevens illustrates are too specific to be of broad application.[[5]](#endnote-5) To consider this possibility, I start Section 4 by using my proposed framework to examine conversations and apparent disagreements about the agency of individuals in roles with restricted freedom. Rather than confirming the worry of narrow application, however, my analysis suggests that the tensions Stevens exhibits are not isolated to service professionals or to those with restricted freedom but lie at the heart of distinctively human agency, the agency of beings who must resolve whether and how to take up particular practical roles, when to change one’s way of being, and the like.

In the literature on such agents, Marina Oshana (2006) takes perhaps the most intuitive position, claiming that restricted freedom undermines autonomy. Alfred Mele (1995) is more optimistic, believing autonomy is compatible with restricted freedom. James Rocha (2011) thinks that both Oshana’s and Mele’s views fail to distinguish cases in which restricted freedom undermines agency from those in which it does not. He proposes that the agents’ own welfare standards help us differentiate such cases. I suggest that agents like Stevens show the intuitive strength of both the pessimistic and the optimistic positions. But they also show that even if Rocha is right that agents’ welfare standards can help determine when subservience is problematic or benign, a more nuanced theory is needed to explain our competing intuitions about agents (like Stevens) who effectively but inflexibly guide their actions according to their adopted welfare standards. Such a theory can explain how the same agent could exhibit key features of effective human agency while falling short in others, as we see in Stevens, who exhibits autonomy as self-control (by acting according to his adopted role and welfare standards) but lacks authenticity as ownership because he fails to take responsibility for his actions (unable and/or refusing to reevaluate and revise his commitments).

My proposal is that robust human agency involves not only self-control, but also flexibility and openness to learning about oneself, and to changing and revising one’s roles, values, cares, and commitments. And if self-control is not supplemented with flexibility and openness, agents’ own welfare standards cannot separate cases in which restricted freedom undermines agency from those in which it does not. Additionally, even for individuals not in typically servile roles, a lack of flexibility and openness can make it unclear whether and to what extent their actions can be attributed to them.

In section 5, I argue that authenticity as ownership involves precisely the ongoing flexibility and openness needed to fill this gap. Although some have avoided taking authenticity seriously as a philosophical notion—perhaps finding the popular conception of “being true to oneself” vague or immature—I argue that authenticity’s squishiness is not a bug but a feature which allows it to capture two aspects of distinctively human agency. Authenticity involves not only the right relationship between one’s agential core and one’s actions—authenticity as sincerity—but also, crucially, taking responsibility for one’s actions and life—authenticity as ownership. The unfortunate case of Mr. Stevens shows that for our lives to be and continue to be richly our own, we must not only align our actions with our values, but also that we relate to our commitments and values in the right way. The virtue of authenticity of ownership involves striking a balance between wholehearted devotion, on the one hand, and openness and flexibility, on the other hand. To be authentic, in this way, we must not only be devoted to our commitments and values but also open to revisiting our commitments and values—perhaps changing, loosening, or reinforcing them—and revising our understandings of the sorts of people we are. Moreover, wholeheartedness and flexibility depend on each other. Without flexibility, wholeheartedness easily falls into rigidity, and without wholeheartedness, flexibility degenerates into shapelessness. Ultimately, the responsibility-taking of authenticity involves striking a balance between wholeheartedness and an existential flexibility, both of which are made possible by our capacity to imagine our lives being very different than they are.

**2. Keeping Your Clothes on and Choosing Your Life: Two Types of Dignity**

*The Remains of the Day* begins with Stevens preparing for a countryside drive to visit a past old co-worker, the former Miss Kenton (now Mrs. Benn), purportedly to gauge her interest in rejoining the significantly reduced staff at Darlington Hall.[[6]](#endnote-6) As Stevens’s journey and narrative proceed, however, one comes to suspect that Stevens’s interest in Kenton was not always merely professional. But given his thoughts on service professionals who marry one another, one also one understands why he did not pursue a romantic relationship with Miss Kenton:

I have always found such liaisons a serious threat to the order in a house. . . . [S]uch marrying amongst more senior employees can have an extremely disruptive effect on work. Of course, if two members of the staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry, it would be churlish to be apportioning blame; but what I find a major irritation are those persons—and housekeepers are particularly guilty here—who have no genuine commitment to their profession and who are essentially going from post to post looking for romance. This sort of person is a blight on good professionalism [i.e., dignity]. (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 51)

For Stevens, dignity is the quality that separates a “‘great’ butler from a merely competent one” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 42). Despite its importance, however, Stevens uses dignity in (at least) two different senses. The predominant sense of dignity in the novel—*Dignity1*—involves, as Stevens clumsily puts it, “not removing one’s clothing in public” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 210). Less metaphorically, Dignity1 is to act consistently according to one’s consciously adopted role or practical identity.[[7]](#endnote-7) The second sense—*Dignity2*—is harder to pin down, but Stevens connects the lack of Dignity2 to not choosing a path, to (merely) trusting, and, consequently, to not being able to claim one’s mistakes as one’s own.

Fleshing things out a little more, Dignity1 involves the self-control to inhabit one’s role fully, to act consistently according to one’s professional role or, more generally, one’s consciously adopted practical identity. Dignity1 “has to do crucially with [one’s] ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits” (Ishiguro, 1988, pp. 42-43). Great butlers

are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and to inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They will wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. (Ishiguro, 1988, pp. 42-43)

He should never “allow himself to be ‘off duty’ in the presence of others” and “must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 199).[[8]](#endnote-8) By contrast, those lacking Dignity1

abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 42; see also p. 169).

Great butlers, and those with Dignity1 more generally, inhabit their roles fully and consistently, even when circumstances make it difficult to do so. Those lacking Dignity1, by contrast, act in their roles partially or inconsistently, or both.

Stevens believes that we should concentrate on what is “within our realm.” For butlers, this means “providing the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies” and not concerning oneself with matters that do not affect the smooth running of the estate (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 199). Accordingly, Stevens ignores distractions that could impede his ability to manage the day’s events, even (or especially) when they are personal. Stevens is largely—perhaps worryingly—successful on this front, unyieldingly and unquestioningly executing Darlington’s requests.

However, Stevens has something different than Dignity1 in mind when he asks, “What dignity is there that [in not choosing one’s own path and not making one’s own mistakes]?” Introduced as a contrast to (merely) trusting, Dignity2 requires something different than acting according to one’s role.[[9]](#endnote-9) Dignity2 requires one to act for one’s own reasons and to not simply defer to others.[[10]](#endnote-10) One could do what someone else recommends and have Dignity2, but one’s justification must go beyond the other’s mere recommendation. Stevens lacks Dignity2 because his actions—mistakes or otherwise—do not stem from reasons of his own. He acts out the script for a good butler, a script he inherited from others and which requires that he not think for himself about the broader reasons for or against particular actions.

To see how Dignity1 and Dignity2 play out in Stevens’s life, we will focus on two key episodes—the night of his father’s death and the night when Miss Kenton tells him she plans to marry Mr. Benn. In both cases, Stevens does “what a good butler would do” by keeping his metaphorical clothes (his professional role) on in public. Because he follows the professional principles he has adopted as life-guiding, he acts with Dignity1. But Stevens himself doubts his Dignity2. The problem is not that he prioritizes some values above others but that the way he understands and performs his professional role (Dignity1) inhibits his ability to genuinely engage with his options. Moreover, his rigid approach to the role makes it hard for him to reconsider his understanding of professional excellence (Dignity2).

At the time of the first episode, Stevens’s father is employed as an under-butler at Darlington Hall. Just prior to a conference of international diplomats Darlington is hosting, Stevens’s father’s already declining health takes a turn for the worse and rapidly deteriorates. Instead of spending time with his father, however, Stevens shows notable (if worrisome) self-control, serving the guests as his father dies upstairs. In so doing, Stevens maintains his professional role as he understands it—and thus his Dignity1—but something seems amiss.

Stevens’s stiffness and his inability to acknowledge and respond to the situation make his conversation with his father on the night of his father’s death painful:

‘I hope I’ve been a good father to you.’

I [Stevens] laughed a little and said: ‘I’m so glad you’re feeling better now.’

‘I’m proud of you. A good son. I hope I’ve been a good father to you. I suppose I haven’t.’

‘I’m afraid we’re extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning.’

My father was still looking at his hands as though he were faintly irritated by them.

‘I’m so glad you’re feeling better now,’ I said again and took my leave. (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 97)[[11]](#endnote-11)

Stevens returns to the dinner downstairs and stays, despite updates of his father’s failing health. In the end, Stevens’s final words to his father are to excuse himself to return to the dinner. When interpreting Stevens’s actions, one could downplay the uniqueness of the incident. Maybe this is only a poignant illustration of one consequence of human finitude—we cannot do everything we value.[[12]](#endnote-12) Alternatively, one could emphasize the incident’s uniqueness—perhaps Stevens makes an isolated mistake by disproportionately valuing his professional obligations.

So, how should we understand this sequence? Do Stevens’s actions reveal that he cares more about his professional duties than about his ailing father? Or do Stevens’s professional commitments blind him to considerations related to his relationship with his father, even though that relationship is more central to him than his employment? With Stevens, it is not simple. His father is a major reason he originally chose to be a butler and to be the kind of butler he is, so his commitment to his professional ideals is entwined with his relationship with his father. He even appears to see ignoring his dying (and then deceased) father as an expression of love (or respect). After his father dies, he tells Miss Kenton, “[P]lease don’t think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 106). He later describes his comportment at this time as pivotal to his life’s direction:

I often look back to the conference and, for more than one reason, regard it as a turning point in my life. For one thing, I suppose I do regard it as the moment in my career when I truly came of age as a butler. That is not to say I consider I became, necessarily, a ‘great’ butler. . . . But should it be that anyone ever wished to posit that I have attained at least a little of that crucial quality of dignity in the course of my career, such a person may wish to be directed to that conference . . . as representing the moment when I first demonstrated I might have a capacity for such a quality. It was one of those events which at a crucial stage in one’s development arrive to challenge and stretch one to the limit of one’s ability and beyond, so that thereafter one has new standards by which to judge oneself. (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 70)

Stevens sees this night as pivotal in developing or showing Dignity1; he inhabits his professional role to the utmost and is not “shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing” (Ishiguro, 1988, pp. 42-43).[[13]](#endnote-13) His narrative is shaped by the pride he takes in his Dignity1, inmaintaining his composure and performing his professional duties in the face of personal desires and loss.

The second incident comes as Stevens has developed a close relationship with Kenton. Soon after his criticism of professionals who marry each other, Stevens implicitly defends his relationship with her:

But let me say immediately I do not have Miss Kenton in mind at all when I say this. Of course, she too eventually left my staff to get married, but I can vouch that during the time she worked as housekeeper under me, she was nothing less than dedicated and never allowed her professional priorities to be distracted. (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 51)

Perhaps partly because Stevens was reticent to pursue a romantic relationship, Kenton eventually starts courting Mr. Benn and he proposes marriage. She does not initially accept the proposal and tells Stevens about the proposal:

‘He has asked me to marry him. I thought you had a right to know that.’

‘Indeed, Miss Kenton. That is very interesting.’

‘I am still giving the matter some thought.’

‘Indeed.’ . . .

‘As I say, Mr Stevens, I am still giving the matter some thought. However, I thought you should be informed of the situation.’

‘I’m very grateful, Miss Kenton. I do hope you have a pleasant evening.’ (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 215)

Although Stevens may seem emotionally callous and blind to the possibility of (lost) love, the text suggests that he is affected more than his measured responses let on. When he assures her it is fine that she leave to go out with Mr. Benn (“you did notify me some time ago”), she observes, “But I can see you are very unhappy about my going out tonight” (Ishiguro, 1988, pp. 215-216). When he insists he is fine, she replies, “Do you imagine that by creating so much commotion in the kitchen and by stamping back and forth like this outside my parlour you will get me to change my mind?” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 216). Even if Stevens denies being affected or it eludes his conscious awareness, his behavior suggests otherwise.[[14]](#endnote-14)

After Kenton returns and tells Stevens that she accepted the marriage proposal, Stevens passes her closed door and comes to believe she is crying behind the closed door. He goes on: “I do not know how long I remained standing there; at the time it seemed a significant period, but in reality, I suspect, it was only a matter of a few seconds” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 227). Why only a few seconds? Stevens explains, “For, of course, I was required to hurry upstairs to serve some of the most distinguished gentlemen of the land and I cannot imagine I would have delayed unduly” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 227). Although Stevens is viscerally affected, he has trained himself to overcome or repress desires or emotions that conflict with being a butler of Dignity1.

Stevens’s commitment to Dignity1 in a profession with few private moments leads him to repeatedly subordinate personal interests to professional duties.[[15]](#endnote-15) Because Stevens is (almost) always on the clock, visiting with his dying father or pursuing a relationship with Miss Kenton could appear as succumbing to distraction or temptation. Those nights become prime opportunities for him to have Dignity1, and Stevens is impressively (worrisomely?) self-controlled—he consistently does what (he thinks) a good butler would do. That self-control, however, comes at a cost to other things he (perhaps tacitly) values.

Stevens could recognize this cost when he introduces Dignity2 at the end of the novel. Many years after leaving Darlington Hall, Kenton (now Mrs. Benn) describes to Stevens some of the unhappy moments of her life: “And you get to thinking about a different life, a better life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 239). Stevens tells us,

It took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed—why should I not admit it—at that moment, my heart was breaking. Before long, however, I turned to her and said with a smile: ‘You’re very right, Mrs. Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock.’ (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 239)

Despite his heartbreak, he quickly regains his composure. As he did many years previously when she told him of her marriage proposal, he maintains his Dignity1 instead of sharing his feelings or reevaluating his commitments. For Stevens, acting according to his chosen role (Dignity1) leads to heartbreak, the loss of things he values, and (at least in retrospect) alienation from his life. To be clear, heartbreak and regret can occur even when we are fully behind the wheel, agentially speaking. As finite creatures, we cannot do everything we value, and decisions between valuable alternatives often involve some experience of loss. However, Stevens illustrates something different. He shows how a certain kind of self-control—inflexibly and unreflectively pursuing one’s practical identity—can atrophy one’s ability to take responsibility for one’s life, whatever the content of the life.[[16]](#endnote-16) And there’s the agential rub. By being a butler of Dignity1 and persistently directing his actions in light of (his understanding of) that role, Stevens makes it hard for himself to have Dignity2, to take responsibility for his actions and his practical identity.

**3. Dignity, Autonomy, and Authenticity**

The self-control of Dignity1 is similar to what J. David Velleman (2006) describes as autonomy, which he contrasts with authenticity. For Velleman, authenticity involves being motivated by one’s true self (acting according to one’s motivational essence) (p. 338). He sees the paradigm case of inauthenticity as one who

laughs at what he thinks he is supposed to find amusing, shows concern for what he thinks he is supposed to care about, and in general conforms himself to the demands and expectations of others. The motives that his behavior is designed to simulate are motives that he doesn’t genuinely have. (Velleman, 2006, p. 338)

On Velleman’s account, the conformist is clearly inauthentic, but his problem with autonomy is different—his autonomy (as self-control) is excessive. He is too strictly self-governing: “he is overly self-controlled, overly deliberate; his grip on the reins of his behavior is too tight, not too loose” (Velleman, 2006, p. 338). Following Velleman, autonomy as self-control refers to the metaphorical “grip on the reins of [one’s] behavior.” To be sure, an agent’s capacity to control which reasons and/or motivational states lead to action is crucial to human agency. But people like Stevens and Velleman’s conformist illustrate how agents can be self-controlled in ways that take them from their broader values and concerns and weaken their capacity to take responsibility for themselves and for their actions. I propose that when Stevens acts with Dignity1 but falls short of Dignity2, he exhibits autonomy as self-control but falls short of authenticity.

Admittedly, the history and the status of authenticity is fraught. Before offering his own account of authenticity, for example, Ernesto Garcia (2015) expresses the worry that, despite its prominence in the philosophical literature and pop culture, discussions of authenticity can seem 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 which capture popular imagination but fail to provide any genuine ethical insights. (pp. 272-273)

In what remains, I argue that the conceptual squishiness of authenticity arises because people use it to capture two crucial aspects of human agency.

Human agency involves acting according to one’s agential core (and different theories will understand what that core is in different ways). Recall, for example, Velleman’s (2006) description of authenticity as acting according to one’s true self, where one’s true self is one’s core motivational essence (p. 338).[[17]](#endnote-17) But human agency is also distinctive because the contours of that core and thus of one’s life are at least partly up to the agent, and so we are responsible for how we relate both to the content of our lives and to that responsibility. On the one hand, then, authenticity can refer to one’s actions expressing one’s agential core (or one’s “deep” or “true” self). One is more authentic insofar as one’s actions flow from or express that agential core. But authenticity can also refer to taking responsibility for one’s life and embracing one’s path, and this typically requires an awareness of the contingency of the particularities of that life. In the responsibility-taking form of authenticity, being true to oneself involves recognizing that one is not exhausted by the particular features of one’s life and is thus responsible for how one takes up one’s particular role(s) and life path.

We can distinguish, then, between two types of authenticity:

(1) *Authenticity as sincerity*: One’s actions are authentic (sincere) to the extent that they express one’s agential core or deep self—desires, values, reasons, cares, some combination of these, or something else.

(2) *Authenticity as ownership*: One’s actions are authentic (owned) to the extent that one takes responsibility for one’s life, aware that the life could have been (and could still be) very different than it is.

These senses of authenticity capture different ways one could choose (or fail to choose) one’s life. Recall Stevens’s earlier claim to not have chosen his life and to thus lack Dignity2. Stevens clearly exhibits autonomy as self-control—he consistently acts according to his professional role—but are his actions authentic (in either sense)? If Stevens’s actions express his agential core, they are authentic as sincere, even if they lead to sadness. And if Stevens takes responsibility for his life path, he shows authenticity as ownership, even if he later denies that he chose his life. One can experience sadness, regret, and lost opportunities even in a life that is authentic in both senses. So, why should we think that Stevens’s life falls short of either authenticity as sincerity or authenticity as ownership?

Because Stevens—both as character and narrator—is consistently guarded emotionally, it is somewhat speculative whether his actions express his agential core or whether he takes responsibility for his life. At the very least, however, different interpretations of Stevens’s moral psychology illustrate how the different senses of authenticity come apart. Let us look first at authenticity as sincerity.

Earlier I suggested that Mr. Stevens is perhaps too effective at self-control. The way he takes up the practical identity of butler leads him to control his actions in a way that squashes competing interests. Merely subordinating desires or interests is not a problem for authenticity—work deadlines or family obligations could lead me to subordinate my desire to watch a movie or sports. And if work or family are more central to my agential core than my desire for entertainment, finishing the paper or helping my child seem more authentic (better expressing who I am). In fact, subordinating some interests in the pursuit of other, more important interests seems a touchstone of effective agency (and authenticity as sincerity captures this intuition). But is this what happens with Stevens?

To see how this works with authenticity as sincerity, let us imagine two interpretations of Stevens—Stevens1 and Stevens2. For Stevens1, his professional values, desires, and interests constitute his agential core. He wants to contribute to a better world, and he believes the best way for him to do so is to serve Darlington and his guests (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 116). So described, when Stevens1 misses his father’s death in order to serve dinner to Darlington’s guests, his self-control allows him to act according to his agential core. Similar things could be said about Stevens1’s decision to downplay or suppress his romantic interest in Miss Kenton. Stevens1’s actions, however heartbreaking, express his agential core. If Stevens1 were to return to his father or express his affection for Miss Kenton, he would be acting against his agential core. In the incidents described earlier, Stevens1 shows both autonomy as self-control and authenticity as sincerity.

However, not all instances of subordination are alike. Consider Stevens2. The priority Stevens2 gives to his professional ideals is grounded in his love for his father. After following his father’s career path, he seeks to be a butler who would make his father proud and so trains himself to subordinate his interests and opinions to his professional duties.[[18]](#endnote-18) However, because Stevens2’s love for his father is at his agential core, when Stevens2 returns to the dinner instead of staying with his father, he subordinates a central attitude to a peripheral one. And if love for his father is part of a broader interest in (actual and potential) family relationships, similar things could be said of his failure to develop a relationship with Miss Kenton. In these cases, Stevens2’s actions show autonomy as self-control but lack authenticity as sincerity. At best, they indirectly express his core attitudes, but by subordinating actions that would better express them—such as staying and genuinely talking with his father.

When it comes to authenticity as ownership, Stevens’s situation is even more precarious. The deferential way he undertakes his professional role and the way the role expands to fill his life make it difficult for him to take ownership of (responsibility for) his actions and life. When he says that he did not choose his life, he could be referring to the existential insight that we can find ourselves in lives not (entirely) of our choosing. When facing that insight, the question becomes one of taking ownership of or responsibility for one’s life and actions.

The responsibility-taking of authenticity of ownership is distinct from the standards of moral responsibility usually discussed in agency theory, but the idea is familiar. Frankfurt (1988) describes it as taking responsibility for one’s character:

whether the person is responsible for his own character has to do with whether he has taken responsibility for his characteristics. It concerns whether the dispositions at issue, regardless of whether their existence is due to a person’s own initiative and causal agency or not, are characteristics with which he identifies and which he thus by his own will incorporates into himself as constitutive of what he is. (pp. 171-172)

For Frankfurt, one takes responsibility for one’s character and thereby constitutes oneself by identifying with one’s characteristics.

Such an understanding of authenticity figures prominently in the phenomenological tradition.[[19]](#endnote-19) Heidegger (1927/2006), for example, believes humans are distinctive because their existence can be a problem for them. As creatures that can care about the forms their lives take, being authentic is to take a stand on one’s existence, to take responsibility for one’s way of being. Taking a stand on one’s existence involves being aware that the particular contours of one’s life are contingent—they could have been (and could still be) different—and then still taking responsibility for one’s life.[[20]](#endnote-20) Heideggerian authenticity suggests another way one can (fail to) be true to oneself. One is true to oneself in the sense captured by *Eigentlichkeit* insofar as one exercises the capacity to take responsibility for one’s being-in-the-world in light of the awareness that one’s agency is not exhausted by one’s contingent features and circumstances. One relates to the content of one’s life more authentically by taking responsibility for one’s life and less authentically by ignoring or fleeing from that responsibility (Heidegger, 1927/2006). Authenticity as ownership thus requires awareness of one’s possibilities, as well as openness and flexibility towards those possibilities.

Heidegger uses “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) to describe our existential situatedness, the way we find ourselves always already thrown in ways that are not entirely up to us—guided by desires, enmeshed in relationships and roles, involved in projects, and so forth.[[21]](#endnote-21) The danger, as Heidegger sees it, is that we can (and tend to) take over the possibilities afforded us as generic selves—as *das Man*—and not as unique individuals. We can wear the right clothes, listen to the right music, read the right books, support the right humanitarian causes, and the like. But if we do so merely because that is what one does and without taking responsibility for that way of being, we live less authentically. In light of this worry, one could think authenticity requires one to break from societal norms and blaze a trail, flouting convention or tradition.[[22]](#endnote-22) However, a life being authentic or inauthentic (in the sense of ownership) does not depend on its having uniquely *authentic* or *inauthentic* content, but rather on *how* one relates to or takes up the content of the life.

Although authenticity is often understood as an intrapersonal virtue—as something we owe to ourselves—authenticity as ownership has a strong social underpinning. Andrea Westlund (2003) highlights the interpersonal dimension of intrapersonal responsibility-taking:

We expect, encourage, and even exhort others to take responsibility for themselves—to be their own persons, to think for themselves, to take charge of their own lives—in a range of contexts . . . [such as] giving or seeking advice, holding counsel, or just discussing what’s to be done. In engaging in these and many similar practices it makes a significant difference to how one proceeds whether one’s interlocutor seems genuinely to be holding herself answerable to one’s concerns or, for example, merely to be mouthing relevant-sounding platitudes with which she thinks one might be placated.” (pp. 497-498)

Whether and how we take responsibility for ourselves matters not only for ourselves but also, importantly, for those we interact with in our daily lives.

Stevens pretty clearly falls short on the interpersonal dimension that Westlund describes. To some degree, his very claim to not have chosen his life is itself a failure to take responsibility for a life that he *had* chosen in some ordinary sense. But does this failure also have intrapersonal consequences? That is, although Stevens (emphatically) identifies with being a butler, does his failure to take responsibility for his life limit the extent to which identifying with his role allows him to constitute himself, the intrapersonal work Frankfurt describes? Using Westlund’s framework, Stevens does not hold himself answerable to the nuances of the situations he encounters and instead uses “relevant-sounding platitudes” to guide and justify his actions. These platitudes could be attempts to deflect responsibility, but this is complicated by the fact that Stevens sees extreme deference as a professional duty. Stevens consistently defers to others for what he ought to do. He obviously defers to Darlington, but he also credits his professional standards to a publication by the Hayes Society and describes his younger self looking forward to conversations with admired butlers to clarify the finer points of his professional duties. Although Stevens has consciously adopted the role of butler and shows autonomy as self-control by effectively acting according to his narrow conception of what makes one a good butler, the self-controlled, full-time, and deferential way he inhabits the role makes it unclear if his reasons for actions are genuinely his own.[[23]](#endnote-23) His ability to think for himself and thus to choose his life in the way required by authenticity as ownership seems compromised. Stevens shows that we oversimplify and mischaracterize the agency of individuals who identify with a role and effectively (but inflexibly) pursue it if we assess it according to only one standard.

Ideally, one would be self-controlled in the pursuit of projects that reflect one’s agential core (sincerity) and would take responsibility for one’s life (ownership) and not defer responsibility to others. But human agency is not always so felicitous. Stevens shows how one can be self-controlled in ways that do not clearly express one’s agential core and that ultimately undermine one’s ability to take ownership of one’s life. To be clear, taking responsibility for one’s life does not (always) require altering the content of a life. But it does involve taking up that content for reasons of one’s own and not merely deferring to others.[[24]](#endnote-24)

If deference is the problem, however, is the conflict between autonomy as self-control and authenticity as ownership unique to those in subordinate professions? If so, Stevens would seem especially susceptible because he takes great pride in subordinating his interests, opinions, and even happiness in his professional pursuits.[[25]](#endnote-25) In this vein, Kwame Appiah (2005) estimates that “few readers of Ishiguro’s novel will aspire to be a butler, least of all the sort of butler that Mr. Stevens aimed to be” (p. 10). So, even if Stevens illuminates the moral psychology of those dedicated to subordinate roles, the insights could be restricted to individuals in those roles. In section 4, I examine this possibility by using Stevens and my proposed autonomy/authenticity framework to engage discussions on the agency of individuals with restricted freedom. I aim to show, first, the importance of distinguishing between different ways in which actions can (fail to) trace back to an agent. Because different types of restricted freedom could prove more problematic for one agential standard than for another, in many cases ambivalence is the appropriate attitude to take toward the agency of such agents. But I argue further that our ambivalence about someone like Stevens extends to agents more broadly. Rocha highlights how many careers and life paths involve significant subordination and seeks to explain how some instances of subordination are agentially problematic while others are not. My framework allows us to differentiate between different ways subordination can problematize one’s agency. Deference is not only inevitable in many (perhaps all) roles, but given the structure of the social world and the sheer amount of information available, deference to authorities is often crucial to one’s flourishing. To understand our potential ambivalence about the status of Stevens’s agency, we need to appreciate the impact of the inflexible way he undertakes his role. Of course, subordinate roles may disproportionality lead to vicious inflexibility, but narrow-minded and inflexible self-control can occur in a variety of roles, not only in those typically seen as subordinate or as inherently undermining autonomy. In section 5, I examine how authenticity as ownership can serve as a corrective to the vicious inflexibility Stevens exhibits. Authenticity as ownership, I argue, involves striking a balance between the problematic inflexibility or rigidity we see in Stevens, on the one hand, and something like shapelessness, on the other. One must be flexible toward one’s commitments and open toward one’s possibilities, while still wholeheartedly embracing one’s existential possibilities.

**4. Stevens, Servility, and the Motley Crew of Moral Psychology**

After indicting the agency literature for relying on a bland agent, Velleman (2000) pushes for a moral psychology that reflects the whole motley crew, including the “disaffected, refractory, silly, satanic, or punk” (p. 99). Various theorists have since written on individuals whose characteristics or patterns of behavior make the content of their lives heavily dependent on others—such as servility, self-abnegating deference, and subservience (Hill, 1991; Rocha, 2011; Westlund 2003).[[26]](#endnote-26) Although these characteristics and patterns of behavior seem antithetical to freedom and thus appear *prima facie* incompatible with ideals of robust human agency such as autonomy and authenticity, there is significant disagreement about the agential status of such individuals.

Taking a more optimistic position, Alfred Mele (1995) claims that agents with restricted freedom can be autonomous if they act in self-controlled (not akratic) ways, their motivational states are not coerced or compelled, they are not deceived about the nature of their work, and they can reliably deliberate. Although reduced freedom can lead to a loss of autonomy if it interferes with any of these conditions, it need not. For example, when Odysseus ties himself to the mast in order to ignore the siren song, he restricts his future freedom, but the restriction helps him better pursue his broader aims. Such restrictions do not undermine but instead facilitate robust agency. Marina Oshana (2006), however, is more pessimistic. She thinks that even if agents freely choose to restrict their own freedom, the reduced freedom could threaten their autonomy. Some of her examples involve individuals who embrace subservience and restricted freedom for religious reasons, such as Taliban Woman and the monk.[[27]](#endnote-27) But others choose such lives out of mere preference—Harriet (a character inspired by Virginia Woolf’s work) chooses to be a deferential spouse and homemaker because she prefers subservience. For Oshana, the problem is not that these agents act against their values—as she describes them, their actions align with their values—but that, when immersed in the subservient roles, it is no longer up to them whether they act according to their values. Instead, whether their actions express their values depends on those to whom they are subservient.

If we use Stevens to adjudicate between Mele and Oshana, we may appear to be at a standoff. Mele’s view captures the intuition that Stevens is behind the wheel—he does, after all, act according to values he explicitly embraces. But Oshana’s worry also rings true: even if Stevens originally chooses a life of subservience, as time passes, it becomes less clear whether it is still up to Stevens whether his actions express his values. When he misses his father’s death and avoids a relationship with Miss Kenton, his actions express explicitly endorsed values (perhaps at the expense of other values). But even if his actions match his values, his longstanding patterns of deference to Darlington and to his professional demands could make it seem a matter of luck whether his actions align with his values.

James Rocha (2011) thinks that the differences between Mele’s and Oshana’s accounts lead to a standoff of intuitions. Moreover, he thinks that neither adequately accounts for autonomy in subservient roles. According to him, Oshana’s view too quickly excludes subservient workers who choose largely dependent lives. And because many lives and careers involve significant subservience, he believes Oshana’s view disqualifies too many, “lumping together those who sufficiently control their lives in spite of subservience and those for whom subservience is a major impediment to living well” (Rocha, 2011, p. 319). However, Rocha finds Mele’s view too inclusive. Although Mele’s view makes autonomy achievable for a broader range of agents, he thinks it fails to capture the intuition that subservience itself poses a problem to autonomy. For Mele, nothing about subservience directly conflicts with autonomy, only to the extent that it impedes one’s ability to satisfy the requirements of autonomy described above. According to Rocha, Oshana’s position too quickly disqualifies lives with subservience, but Mele’s fails to account for the intuition that subservience is conceptually opposed to autonomy. In the end, Rocha sees a stalemate, with each view leaving something to be desired.

To move past the stalemate, Rocha proposes that agents’ own welfare standards can help distinguish cases in which subservience is agentially problematic from those in which it is not. On his view,

Autonomy will still center around self-control [as Mele proposes], and will normally conflict with subservience [as Oshana proposes]. . . . [T]he agent's own sense of happiness will allow us to distinguish cases where subservience counts as a loss of autonomy from ones where it does not. (Rocha, 2011, p. 322)

Autonomy is thus achievable for agents in positions of restricted freedom, when their actions promote their own welfare standards.

However, the case of Stevens poses two challenges for Rocha’s analysis and his proposed solution. First, Rocha (2011) himself claims that one challenge of the autonomy literature is “to determine whether everyone is writing on the same topic” (p. 313). So, when someone like Stevens satisfies Mele’s conditions but falls short of Oshana’s, before we categorize Mele’s view as overly inclusive and Oshana’s as overly exclusive, it seems that we should ask if they are writing on the same topic or if the differences arise because they are focusing on different aspects of agency. Second, the case of Stevens shows that Rocha’s proposed welfare standard just pushes back the problem. On its own, it cannot distinguish when subservience is agentially problematic from when it is not. Specifically, because Rocha believes the relevant welfare standards are “subjective,” for his account to avoid Oshana’s worries about individuals like Taliban Woman, the ability to revise one’s welfare standards is not just beneficial but crucial.

Earlier I suggested that Stevens shows autonomy as self-control (and perhaps authenticity as sincerity) but falls short of authenticity as ownership. Similarly, Stevens could satisfy Mele’s standards—he is self-controlled, his motivational states are not (overtly) coerced, he is not deceived about the nature of his work, and he can (relatively) reliably deliberate—while still lending support to Oshana’s worries. We could see Stevens as a (far) less adventurous Odysseus, restricting his freedom to better pursue his broader aim of making a “contribution to the creation of a better world” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 116). In this way, Stevens could be autonomous in a role with restricted freedom.

But Oshana’s view still explains why few would aspire to be an agent like Stevens. We want more than mere bodily control; we want to be the sources of our reasons for action. And individuals in servile roles relinquish some of this control. One of Oshana’s key concerns is that the structural deference involved in subordinate roles limits one’s ability to ensure that one’s actions express one’s values (or that the alignment between actions and values is one’s own doing). After adopting his subordinate role, Stevens is very self-controlled in doing what he thinks his job requires, even when it comes at great personal cost (and even when it makes him complicit in morally bad actions). Self-control is only part of the story, and in deferential roles, self-control can attenuate the connection between one’s actions and one’s values. Whether Stevens’s actions align with his values increasingly depends on those to whom he defers. So, while Mele illustrates how agents can be behind the wheel even when their freedom is restricted, Oshana shows how restricted freedom can still problematize one’s agency along other axes. Although both use the term ‘autonomy,’ they seem to highlight distinct aspects of human agency.

Now to the question of welfare standards. For Rocha (2011), autonomy requires that agents work toward their “own subjective [welfare] standards” but not “that agents strive to meet objective standards” (p. 323). What matters is that one works toward the standards one sets for oneself, even if those standards do not lead to one’s (objective) welfare. Agents set welfare standards “to ensure happy lives. These standards [ . . . ] just are the goals, projects, relationships, and commitments that agents deem important to their lives” (Rocha, 2011, p. 322). Stevens establishes his welfare standards by embracing the role of butler and (what he takes to be) the accompanying commitments. Given how Rocha understands welfare standards, Stevens seems a prime candidate for achieving autonomy in a subservient role:

It is entirely up to [him] what makes [him] happy, but [his] subjective standards represent true commitments in that once [he] has determined [he] will be happy by meeting these standards, [he] will fail to find happiness if [he] fails to meet [his] standards (or fails to change them if [he] no longer cares to work towards them)” (Rocha, 2011, p. 323).

Through his impressive (if worrisome) self-control, Stevens seems to meet his welfare standards.

But Stevens’s claim to not have chosen his life suggests that not all is well. Even though he gets something right by following the norms of his adopted role, since he narrowly interprets and inflexibly pursues his chosen welfare standards, to get it right is also to get something wrong. Because subservience is intertwined with his central life project—being a butler of dignity—achieving the welfare standards he has set for himself requires subservience. On Rocha’s (2011) account, agents exhibit autonomy by assessing their lives according to their welfare standards: “She retains control over whether she is autonomous because she can assess her life, along with the amount of subservience within it, on her standards” (p. 323). But when one’s welfare standards are tied up with subservience, how can those standards be used to assess whether one’s life involves too much subservience? Because major life decisions and commitments typically permeate one’s practical outlook, this kind of subservient agent could become trapped by their earlier decision. Oshana illustrates this problem with Taliban Woman. She acts according to welfare standards she has embraced, but to the extent that she incorporates and acts according to her adopted deferential role, she limits her ability to effectively assess whether her life involves too much subservience. The resulting situation simply redraws the divide between Mele and Oshana: Mele emphasizes that such agents can still act in self-controlled ways in pursuit of their adopted ends; Oshana emphasizes the problematic limitations (entrapment) such commitments easily lead to.

My point here is that even if Rocha is right that subservient lives are not equally nonautonomous, his proposed welfare standard cannot yet explain the status of agents who act in self-controlled ways according to adopted welfare standards that involve subservience. If Rocha says that such agents are autonomous, the worries motivating Oshana’s pessimism reemerge. But if he says that they are not autonomous, then can one really act autonomously against one’s own best interest? This puts pressure on Rocha’s view that the relevant welfare standards are subjective, not objective. For Rocha’s subjective welfare standards to avoid the worries that Oshana highlights, more is needed. Rocha mentions the capacity to reassess one’s commitments, and this is crucial. But Stevens shows that if reassessment is undertaken only from the vantage point of one’s current welfare standards, it may be inadequate. For reassessment to work, one needs the normative flexibility to genuinely (re)consider one’s life path and one’s values.

Although one gets something right, agentially speaking, by acting according to one’s adopted role(s), Stevens shows how acting according to one’s explicit role can be part of the problem. With his father and Miss Kenton, Stevens’s inflexibility leads him to act contrary to things that are (or are becoming) important to him. There can be important gaps between the standards one adopts to govern one’s life, on the one hand, and the standards that would constitute the good life for that person. And our consciously adopted roles can make it hard to see clearly (and more broadly) our values, cares, and what is most important to us. We can thus act according to life plans that conflict with our flourishing, unable to see clearly who, what, or how much something matters to us. And such inflexible self-control can prevent us from revising our welfare standards in light of new experiences and opportunities. Of course, subservient roles could make individuals prone to normative inflexibility or perhaps increase the chances that such inflexibility undermines their well-being. But the inability to see what one’s (future) welfare involves and inflexibly committing to and continuing on one’s path is not limited to those in subservient roles. For one, some typically subservient roles can allow for such normative flexibility—Stevens, for example, could have resigned from his post at any point. But also, many roles not thought to be subservient involve significant subservience or structural features that are functionally similar that can (problematically) capitalize one one’s inability to see one’s (future) welfare and to adapt to changing preferences, new opportunities, and so forth.

Up to this point, I have aimed to show that although Stevens is a distinctively servile agent, he has freely chosen, remained in, and even embraced his role. And although regret pervades the end of his narrative, the actions that led to regret are ones he uses earlier to highlight his professional excellence. However, the way he acts according to his adopted role decreases his ability to revise his life commitments and path. This dynamic may be more likely—and more visible—in individuals with restricted freedom or in deferential roles. Stevens’s being a paid servant with the explicit goal to serve (and to defer to) his employer could seem to inevitably make things worse. But this is to overlook or downplay key features of Stevens himself that could have created agential tensions even if Stevens had instead decided to become an entrepreneur, a surgeon, or a teacher. To be sure, specific features of different roles can affect agency in complex ways. But how agents relate to their roles—whatever they are—is also crucial. The dynamic we see clearly in Stevens can arise when agents undertake their roles in inflexible, narrowly interpreted ways, whether their roles involve significant subordination or deference or not. Controlling one’s attitudes to better fulfill one’s adopted role is an agential virtue (what I call autonomy as self-control). But when paired with normative inflexibility, such self-control can further weaken one’s ability to act for reasons of one’s own and to (re)assess and (re)evaluate one’s commitments (crucial for authenticity as ownership).

**5. Authenticity and Normative Flexibility**

Perhaps counterintuitively, in order to commit oneself to projects in the way distinctive of authenticity as ownership, one must be flexible—open to the possibility of revising one’s understanding of and even changing those projects. Heidegger’s notion of authenticity of ownership hinges largely on whether and how one takes responsibility for one’s way of being—including one’s thrownness and one’s inherited and adopted life projects and practical identities.

Earlier I described Dignity1 and Dignity2 in terms of practical identity, which Christine Korsgaard (1996) understands as “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” (p. 101). Practical identities (such as “a member of a certain profession, someone’s lover or friend, and so on” [Korsgaard, 1996, p. 101]) give one reasons and obligations and, to a large extent, form the content of one’s life. Korsgaard (2009) describes the variety of ways we come into our practical identities much as Heidegger (1927/2006, p. 12) explains the ways we come into our possibilities:

Some we are born into, like being someone’s child or neighbor or being the citizen of a certain country. Some we adopt for reasons, like joining a profession that is worthwhile and suits your talents or devoting yourself to a cause in which you ardently believe. Many we adopt voluntarily, but without anything that is in more than a marginal sense a reason. (Korsgaard, 2009, p. 13)

Yet however we come into our practical identities (for Korsgaard) or possibilities (for Heidegger), authenticity as ownership requires one to take responsibility for them and not merely take them up in a generic and/or deferential way.

Understood in this way, the responsibility-taking of authenticity of ownership does not require one to abandon one’s inherited possibilities (or identities) and find novel ones. As William Blattner (2013) puts it, authenticity (as ownership) does not “require making a clean break with one’s past and setting out on some wild adventure” (p. 331). The authentic individual can return “to who [one] already is, but with a clear-sighted understanding of the normative demands inherent in who [one] already is” (Blattner, 2013, p. 331). Rather than a break from one’s past or present life, authenticity as ownership requires taking up one’s life, including the norms of one’s roles, in a self-responsible way, with a keener understanding of one’s situation and roles and of the different ways one could live one’s possibilities. The normative flexibility of authenticity as ownership, then, requires an openness not only to new possibilities and identities but also to different ways of understanding the normative demands of one’s possibilities and one’s adopted or inherited practical identities.

While individuals in subservient roles may be uniquely prone to acting in ways that they have not chosen, as Stevens puts it, this understanding of authenticity as ownership shows how such challenges extend to individuals in many different roles or practical identities. Most of us have various roles. And negotiating the (sometimes competing) demands of those roles is an ongoing process. Stevens illustrates the tendency to get swept up into a single role and particular ways of performing a role, as well as the potential perils of doing so. He identifies so thoroughly and consistently as a butler that actions related to his other roles—such as son or (potential) lover—fail to register as genuine possibilities. For him to be Miss Kenton’s lover, for example, he would need to change the absolute and self-abnegating comportment (he thinks is) required of a good butler. As a result of his understanding of what it means to be a good butler, a potential life with Miss Kenton appears as a temptation to be resisted, even though he is clearly emotionally affected by the loss of the possibility. Sadly, Stevens seems to consciously articulate this tension only much later in life when he looks back on his missed opportunity with heartbreak and regret.[[28]](#endnote-28) Those in subservient roles could be particularly vulnerable to such challenges, if wholeheartedly pursuing a subservient role uniquely discourages one from acknowledging tensions with other aspects of one’s life and (potentially) reinterpreting the normative demands of a practical identity. Because subservience involves deference to others—whether specific individuals or established norms—this seems plausible. But one can fail to acknowledge tensions between different roles and be normatively inflexible in many different practical identities. Even if subservient roles present unique challenges, some challenges often associated with subservience can occur in roles that seem clearly compatible with robust human agency. One can fail to live in light of the awareness that one is not exhausted by any specific role or practical identity and thus lack the self-ownership that Stevens claims to lack, whether one is a butler, a barber, a welder, a parent, or an entrepreneur.

Acting according to one’s self-conception (role, practical identity, etc.) is understandably seen as central to robust human agency, but unless self-control is tempered by the responsibility-taking, flexibility, and openness that characterize authenticity as ownership, the self-controlled pursuit of one’s (understanding of one’s) role can lead one to fall short of agency at its best (see Tiberius, 2008). Without normative flexibility and openness, attempts to (re-)evaluate one’s practical situation are of limited value, because they will likely be undertaken from the very perspectives to which one is overcommitted and from which one cannot even imaginatively distance oneself. Normative flexibility allows one to imaginatively occupy different evaluative frameworks in a way that ultimately allows for more robust ownership of one’s reasons, actions, and life, and helps ensure that one’s self-controlled agency continues to align with one’s evolving conception of the good life. To be sure, such ownership can involve changing one’s framework(s). But sometimes, this ownership may only involve embracing one’s framework with fresh eyes and a broader perspective. Stevens, for example, could examine his understanding of dignity and what it is to be a good butler and develop a more expansive understanding of dignity and professional excellence. Instead, he exerts considerable self-control in order to act according to his narrow understanding of the demands of his practical identity, resisting temptations presented by personal relationships (and his moral judgment). This is precisely the failure addressed by authenticity as ownership. Instead of anonymously, uncritically, and deferentially following the inherited norms of one’s role or identity, the authentic individual embraces the responsibility for how one takes these up.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The problem that Stevens highlights is less that one can miss out on worthwhile opportunities or fail to develop or end meaningful relationships, but that even in some instances of intentional action, it is unclear whether the acts that lead to loss are robustly one’s own doing. Stevens’s unflagging professionalism could make him a better butler.[[30]](#endnote-30) But his inflexible commitment to particular principles compromises his ability to revise his commitments in light of new, (perhaps) unexpected opportunities and to act according to nascent values or cares. Even if Stevens initially chose to be a butler to improve the world, a long life of deference to Darlington and to his professional role has likely atrophied his ability to ensure that the alignment between his actions and his values is up to him.[[31]](#endnote-31) Again, the problem is not merely that he suppresses some personal interests—suppressing some interests in order to pursue others can indicate effective agency—but that the all-consuming and inflexible way he undertakes his role impedes his ability to value different things or to act according to a range of values.[[32]](#endnote-32) Over time, this normative inflexibility can make the connection between one’s values and one’s actions increasingly tenuous.

The normative flexibility of authenticity as ownership can allow one to transition more smoothly between different roles and to respond seamlessly to the roles’ different standards. Relatedly, it can help one continue to refine and develop one’s normative framework(s). If Stevens had (or were to develop) a more expansive notion of professional excellence, it would help him better respond to the range of reasons stemming from other aspects of his life, such as being a son or (potential) lover. And a more flexible understanding of the normative commitments of his practical identity could allow him to restructure his life for greater overall coherence among his values, interests, and actions. But from the perspective of someone like Stevens, such restructuring and even the prerequisite flexibility could be seen as abandoning his ideals. For these reasons, individuals like Stevens find themselves in a pickle. Lacking normative flexibility, the self-control often prized in agency theory can create problems, not only in terms of the agent’s ability to act according to her welfare standards, but more fundamentally in terms of the agent’s ability to relate appropriately to the content of her life, to ensure that whether and why she does what she does is up to her, regardless of her role(s).

In light of the details of Stevens’s own case, I have so far highlighted the importance of normative flexibility in authenticity as ownership. But although appropriate to Stevens, this is only part of the story. The virtue of authenticity as ownership involves striking a balance or harmony between normative flexibility and wholehearted commitment to one’s life. When this balance is lost in either direction, we are left with a vice that undermines one’s ability to take responsibility for one’s life. As we have seen, on the one extreme, we have someone like Stevens, whose inflexible pursuit of his narrow understanding of his adopted life path makes it unclear whether his apparently wholehearted commitment is what it appears to be and whether the actions that flow from his chosen life path are genuinely his own doing. However, in the other direction, without the right sort of commitment, what might appear to be normative flexibility quickly slides into something like agential shapelessness, in which the contours of one’s life lack consistency and the agent becomes something like a normative chameleon. Judge Wilhelm, the author of Part II of *Either/Or*, criticizes the aesthetic life of A (of Part I) on something like these grounds, claiming that even A’s pursuit of the aesthetic life is undermined by his lack of normative commitment (Kierkegaard, 1987).[[33]](#endnote-33) What at first might appear to be the flexibility to modify and, when necessary, pivot from one’s views and actions can quickly degenerate into an unprincipled sliding in the direction of least resistance. Properly understood, the virtue of authenticity of ownership, involves a normative flexibility that depends on commitment and wholehearted commitment made possible by flexibility.

As a concluding note, if Stevens’s problems are a matter of authenticity as ownership, the end of the novel suggests some hope for Stevens and individuals who find themselves in lives that they have not chosen, and perhaps hints at how to develop normative flexibility. As he returns to work for Mr. Farraday after his countryside trip, Stevens is practicing bantering, something he previously saw as unbefitting to a dignified butler. Of course, Stevens could be continuing his patterns of deference and simply be (a bit belatedly) updating the person he will defer to and choosing to learn to banter because it matters to Farraday. But his interest in banter could also signal that he is open to different ways to take up his role and to revising his understanding of professional excellence, potentially tightening the connection between his actions and values and thereby increasing the chances that the reasons for his actions are more fully his own. If Stevens can embrace the possibility that his life could have been (and could yet be) different, it could help him return to the life anew and take genuine ownership for it. Because normative flexibility requires the ability to (imaginatively) distance oneself from one’s commitments and predominant normative framework, it is threatened whenever one cannot see outside of one’s understanding of one’s role(s). Just as Stevens’s trip provides distance from his role, paradigmatic existentialist experiences such as anxiety, boredom, and insomnia can loosen one’s entanglement to the particularities of one’s situation. Such loosening can occur, and the accompanying flexibility can be developed, in other ways, of course. Whatever their specifics, such experiences can allow one to face the contingent nature of the particular details of one’s life in a way that ultimately allows one to embrace those features and robustly commit to (or choose) one’s life.

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1. For Stevens, position and capacity blur together, as shown by his later remark to Miss Kenton: “There are many things you and I are simply not in a position to understand” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 149). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To be clear, Stevens’s claim that Darlington “wasn’t a bad man at all” should be taken with a large grain of salt, whether Stevens is willfully deceiving readers, self-deceived, or simply unable to see Darlington clearly. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Stevens’s conception of dignity is idiosyncratic and (arguably) distinct from the notion of dignity typically involved in normative ethics. Because my aim is to understand Stevens’s agential perspective, I rely on Stevens’s use(s) of dignity without examining whether or how it relates to sense(s) of dignity in other discussions. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Autonomy* and *authenticity* are famously prominent but fraught terms. Despite (or because of) their prevalence, they can mean different things to different people and in different contexts. Nomy Arpaly (2004) describes at least eight different uses of autonomy, in “Which Autonomy?” (p. 173). Authenticity fares no better: Simon Feldman (2015) notes five kinds of authenticity in *Against Authenticity: Why You Shouldn’t Be Yourself*, and Ernesto Garcia (2015) describes three popular conceptions of authenticity before presenting his own account in “The Virtue of Authenticity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Stevens’s role of butler is an interesting case, because although Stevens is a butler (technically a servant) it is also a role of significant authority and responsibility and one that he freely chose and could choose to quit at any time. Ultimately, the problems Stevens illustrates are more due to his (lack of) certain qualities than to the specific role he occupies. It could be that certain roles tend to encourage these qualities (or their lack), but the dynamic Stevens illustrates could occur in a broad range of life paths and professional roles. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping highlight this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Darlington Hall, which Stevens describes as a (once) great English manor, has recently been purchased by Mr. Farraday, a wealthy American. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Arthur Applbaum (1999) highlights this sense of dignity and equates it with person neutrality (pp. 63–67). He adds that while Stevens’s notion may capture what is involved in being a great butler, it is different from what we typically consider to be dignity. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Appropriately, Stevens attributes the phrase “dignity in keeping with his position” to the Hayes Society, a professional organization which “claimed to admit butlers ‘of only the very first rank’” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 31). The phrase was an attempt to respond to external pressures to elaborate membership criteria, which were unclear other than the prerequisite of being “attached to a distinguished household,” which excluded the houses of businessmen or the “newly rich” (ibid. p. 32.) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Significantly, this insight comes while he is touring the countryside and is therefore distanced (geographically and agentially) from his typical professional concerns. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Trusting* is Stevens’s term, but other ways of deferring responsibility for one’s preferences, values, decisions, or actions work similarly. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The way Stevens repeatedly ignores signs of his father’s declining health and impending death—instead focusing on serving the visiting dignitaries—could show he is in denial about his father’s death (see, for example, Ishiguro, 1988, p. 97, pp. 104­–10). But even if his commitment to his professional duties is not the primary driver of his actions, it could still contribute to his inability to face his father’s death and to create coherence among his values. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Connie Rosati (2007) argues that the very capacities that enable autonomous human agency also make a certain kind of regret inevitable. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. One could be tempted to see Stevens as emotionally unaffected, but Stevens appears visibly affected by the night’s events. Multiple people (unaware of his father’s poor health) ask him if he is all right. After he insists that he is fine, someone replies, “You look like you are crying” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 105). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Describing an agent experiencing internal conflict, Agnes Callard (2018) writes, “The struggle she experiences in virtue of her mixed condition is manifest in every aspect of her agency: her facial expressions, her idle movements, her inner monologue, her feelings, her speech” (p. 125). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. After both episodes, Stevens emphasizes that he maintained the dignity in keeping with his position. See Ishiguro (1988, p. 110, p. 227). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Moreover, Stevens’s expanded range of emotions—including his heartbreak—occurs in a very different work situation. Stevens is now employed by Mr. Farraday, who tries (usually unsuccessfully) to engage him in banter and encourages his countryside visit. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Although Velleman himself is skeptical of such core motivational essences, potential candidates include one’s desires, values, or cares. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Richard Moran (2002) suggests that if one manipulates oneself to produce a desire, belief, or feeling (whether through training, mental discipline, or in some other way), the resulting attitude will be one toward which one is passive: “it is inflicted on me, even if I am the one inflicting it” (p. 199). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Although I develop a Heideggerian account of authenticity as ownership, similar themes are found in Sartre’s (1992) discussion of sincerity and bad faith. Frankfurt’s (1988) work on identification and wholeheartedness also emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for one’s character. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Heidegger’s *Eigentlichkeit* is usually translated as “authenticity.” *Eigentlichkeit* does suggest being genuine as opposed to counterfeit, false, fake, or phony, but *eigen* also highlights an action or life being one’s own as opposed to merely conforming to social expectations and/or deferring responsibility for how one lives to others. To capture these connotations, John Haugeland (2013) translates *Eigentlichkeit* as “ownedness” instead of “authenticity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Our lives are filled with activities and pursuits—what Heidegger (1927/2006, p. 12) calls possibilities—which we come into in a number of ways: (1) some we have chosen, (2) some we have stumbled into, and (3) some we have already “grown up in.” In their translation of *Sein und Zeit*, Macquarrie and Robinson translate *ist in sie hineingeraten* of (2) as “got itself into them” (Heidegger, 1962). Wrathall (2015, p. 204) prefers “stumbled into” to highlight the somewhat unintentional way of becoming entangled in activities and purpose, in contrast to an active “choice.” Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation can do that if you think of people who have a knack for getting themselves into trouble, despite their best intentions. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Charles Taylor (1991) would likely call this non-conformist, trailblazing version of authenticity a “degraded” conception of authenticity (p. 29). Such conceptions focus inordinately on self-fulfillment and overlook the degree to which our lives and identities depend on and are shaped by others. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Stevens’s panic when Miss Kenton finds him reading “a sentimental romance” traces back partly to his desire to never have others see him “off duty.” See Ishiguro, (1988, pp. 165–69). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Westlund (2003) argues that self-abnegating deference is the problem, as prudential deference to genuine experts and authorities seems unproblematic. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Applbaum (1999) describes Stevens as “the starkest example” of strong role relativity and strict person neutrality. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Admittedly, characterizing Hill’s (1991) work as a response to Velleman is anachronistic because Hill’s papers were published first. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Taliban Woman “has embraced the role of subservience and the abdication of independence that it demands, out of reverence, a sense of purpose, and an earnest belief in the sanctity of this role as espoused in certain passages of the Qu'ran” (Oshana, 2006, p. 60). She gives up a career as a physician in order to live a life completely committed to religious piety in a way that makes her completely dependent on the wishes of others. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Talbot Brewer (2011) suggests, “It is only in retrospect that Stevens begins to make sense of the perturbations that have marked his relations with Miss Kenton, and by that time what remains of the day is not sufficient to permit any true compensation for the cost exacted by his notion of dignity” (p. 295). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Coming to see “possibilities ‘as possibilities,’” as something one chooses, is central to Heidegger’s notion of authenticity (Guignon, 2004, p. 130). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. This is debatable, as one could argue that Stevens’s deference makes him less good at serving his employers. With Farraday, this seems obvious. But even Darlington would probably have been better served by a butler who resisted his problematic requests. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Stevens claims not only that it is not his place to *express his opinion* on some matter, but that “a butler who is forever attempting to *formulate* [emphasis added] his own ‘strong opinions’ on his employer’s affairs is bound to lack [loyalty]” (Ishiguro, 1988, p. 200). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Stevens’s situation is distinct from conflicts between two different projects. I value my writing, my teaching, and my family and so must decide how to work out tension in cases of conflict. But this sort of conflict is different from one in which one project involves subordination—say, as a butler or as a deferential housewife. Particularly if the subservient role is central to the agent’s identity, it is unclear whether such an agent can see the available options as viable. Gary Watson (2004) describes addiction as an acquired appetite that impairs one’s normative competence. The substance or behavior can capture one’s attention, “claim one’s consciousness, direct one’s fantasies, break one’s concentration on other things” (pp. 71–72). Analogously, Stevens’s role generates normative noise that makes it difficult for him to stay with his father or Miss Kenton. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for helping articulate these points and for the example of the aesthete of *Either/Or*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)