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The practical potential of living authentically

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The Practical Potential of Living Authentically

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Arts & Letters
James Madison University

by Aaron M. Minnick

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Philosophy & Religion, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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The Practical Potential of Living Authentically

“A man must have a code.”

BUNK MORELAND, *The Wire*

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Acknowledgments

Legend has it that Pablo Picasso, now an old man, was once asked to sketch his interviewer during an interview. Picasso obliged him and after a few minutes, presented the interviewer with a spectacular portrait.

“It’s phenomenal!” said the interviewer. How much do I owe you?”

“Five thousand dollars,” the artist replied.

“Five thousand dollars?!” the man exclaimed. “But this picture took you less than five minutes!”

“No, no, no,” Picasso responded. “I’ve been working on this photo for over 80 years.”

Although my age is considerably less than 80, I too like to think this thesis has taken my entire life to write. To provide a worthy list of acknowledgments, then, would be impossible; I will only mention that I am deeply indebted to the copyediting prowess of my dear mother, the excellent feedback of my two readers, Dr. Pat Fleming and Dr. Mark Piper, and to the thoughts and writings of my advisor and interlocutor Dr. Steven Hoelzel for much of the stimulation of my present work.

Preface

To paraphrase George Orwell, the best books are those that tell us what we already know. Perhaps, then, this thesis will ring most strikingly in the minds of those who have realized a deep dissatisfaction with the universal ethics of the day. Consequently, it is not the final word on the matter, but an exploration of a more practical ethic of living authentically. The paper deals with what I take to be the central question of philosophy: *How should I live?* It shows, I believe, that the proper vantage point to begin that inquiry can be at all times none other than the subjective. The whole sense of the paper might be summed up in the opening epitaph: “A man must have a code.”

Thus, the aim of the paper is to provide a foundation upon which the individual might start to construct his/her own practical-theory for how to live a life in tune with his/her desires. Its purpose will have been achieved if it proves useful and enjoyable to one person who reads and resonates with it. Although this work sits squarely within the tradition and style of analytic philosophy, I think its contents will prove of interest to anyone with the fortitude to read it through to completion, regardless of philosophical training or inclination. The value of the present work, then, lies not in its ambition to transcend philosophy, but in its effort to make it relevant and accessible. To the extent that this value is duly clear, I hope the reader will find him/herself oriented in the direction of greater freedom by a lucid recognition that it is not necessary to accept life as it has been presented.

Harrisonburg, 2017

A. M.

I. Introduction

“In ethics,” Bernard Williams provocatively notes, “*reflection can destroy knowledge.*”¹ Despite its apparent opacity, this cinder block of a statement’s implications are so stark and so pertinent that it is worth chipping away at anyway. While we can certainly reflect and philosophize in cozy offices and classrooms, at meetings and academic conferences, the type of reflection Williams has in mind here often arises naturally, (not to mention with more force), in other, less stable conditions. In the face of genuine adversity, rather than something dreamed up from the armchair, our conscious reasoning is sufficiently shaken up and confused, thus prompting us, often inadvertently, to question what we thought we “knew.” Perhaps, before our intimate experience with adversity, we had a firm grasp on what our duty was, or how a person ought to behave given the circumstances—but now we’re not so sure. Fittingly then, one of the most puzzling moral dilemmas to come out of Western philosophy was not developed in a seminal article, but arose from a conversation Sartre had with a former student. Sartre recounts the exchange:

His elder brother had been killed in the German offensive of 1940 and this young man, with a sentiment somewhat primitive but generous, burned to avenge him. His mother was living alone with him, deeply afflicted...by the death of her eldest son, and her one consolation was in this young man. But he, at this moment, had the choice between going to England to join the Free French Forces or of staying near his mother and helping her to live.²

As Sartre himself recalls only a few paragraphs later, no ethic, religious or otherwise, could possibly be of service to the young man as he sweats his fate—whatever ethical knowledge he may have had, reflection had destroyed it. As Daniel Dennett adds on a related note that applies equally to both our dire and more mundane concerns, “How on Earth could anyone prioritize that cacophony? Not by any systematic process of considering all things, weighing expected utilities, and attempting to maximize. Nor by any systematic generation and testing of Kantian maxims—there are too many to

¹ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006), 148. His emphasis.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. Philip Mairet, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1957), 295-296.

consider.”³ The cacophony he refers to, of course, is the accumulated sum of human ethical ‘knowledge,’ all of which appears plausible on first pass, and yet nevertheless begins to break down upon further reflection. In other words, regardless of the truth and validity of the classic, dominant strands of moral theory, our toolkit for relating to the practical side of everyday life remains inadequate. It is with the hope of patching this hole that we offer *authenticity* as a much-needed practical solution.

The aim of the present work, then, is to explore authenticity as an alternative framework for practical, ethical deliberation that we might use to navigate our everyday lives more compellingly than if we were limited to the means offered by more comprehensive moral theories. Through the lens of authenticity as it manifests itself to us personally, we may find that some ways of being and behaving thereby endorsed do not square neatly with the recommendations offered by other moral theories (much in the same way that their prescriptions often conflict with each other.) To some degree, disagreement of this sort is to be expected—it should not, however, be misconstrued as a signal that total war between the two is upon us. Though playing the same sport (*viz.*, ethics), they remain firmly in different leagues, seeking an answer to different questions: authenticity attempts to answer the question, “How should I live, in this moment?” whereas a consequentialist or deontologist would be concerned with the more tempered question, “What actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances?” (And a virtue ethicist would ask, “How should *one* live?”) We will explore convergences and divergences concerning the practical component of contemporary moral theories more thoroughly in the middle sections of this paper; for now, let it suffice to say that, given its reluctance to provide a ready-made formula for explaining what makes an act unethical, authenticity is not so much attempting to *usurp* a given moral theory wholesale as it is to *augment* the practical dimension where it falls short.

³ Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 509.

To the extent that all ethics research must organize itself around three logical steps to be both coherent and effective, we can accordingly frame our discussion around the following three-pronged approach, taken sequentially: What? So what? Now what? In other words, we will begin by developing a clear, working understanding of *what* authenticity is and how we intend to refer to it. For the purposes of our discussion, (and we will discuss it at length) authenticity at its most basic level can be understood as a state of being whereby the individual in question is fully conscious, aware, and understanding of her motives, actions, and, to the extent possible, implications thereof. In this picture, the authentic individual resonates more with Nietzsche's positive life affirmation than his negative rejection of the herd. To study this notion further will entail following the lineage of authenticity as it precipitates down through the annals of Western philosophy from Kierkegaard to Camus. Despite their common subject matter, their thought on authenticity is often contradictory—the upshot of this observation, of course, is that we will take care to note what appears useful in our more general pursuit of developing a practical approach true to certain facts regarding human motivation (among other things, to be discussed later at length), and discard the rest as we analyze these thinkers. We will then explore and unpack the main themes of authenticity to further flesh out our definition, namely, *subjectivity*, *desire*, *ground projects*, and *presence*.

Having clearly established what we mean by authenticity, we will turn to a discussion of why we should care (that is, so what?). It is here that we will devote space to a discussion of the ways in which authenticity diverges and converges with other leading ethical theories *within the context of their practical action guiding components*. Less emphasis will be placed on theory since, with respect to authenticity, this must largely be supplied by the individual. Here, our primary goal will be twofold: we wish to demonstrate not only how authenticity addresses a set of genuine, practical concerns where others are more silent (*viz.*, divergences), but also how authenticity is linked to its predecessors in ethical thought (*viz.*, convergences). Despite our hesitation to pit authenticity against

more established moral theories, we must be careful not to overstate its originality by separating it from the ethical tradition in which it is undoubtedly rooted. To avoid alienation, special emphasis will be placed on the degree to which authenticity piggybacks off its parents by responding to the same fundamental concerns. It is not ideological battle we wish to do here, but rather creative rethinking. Following this relational groundwork, we will survey a few common objections to authenticity before contending that they need not be legitimate concerns for the individual inclined to inject a dose of authenticity into her life. In the process, we will examine the metaethical and metaphysical foundations on which authenticity resides. For those who have found our ideas convincing to that point, we will offer a brief “user’s manual” of sorts to orient the reader as we move beyond the scope of this paper. Given how prominently practicality is featured throughout this paper, a failure to address the “now what?” question that will assuredly assert itself to anyone convinced by our presentation would be laughably shortsighted. It is in this spirit that we offer a general, straightforward walkthrough for how the individual might begin to realize authenticity in her own life.

To prevent our discussion from becoming unwieldy, we will settle for foregrounding only those issues which directly speak to the what, so what, now what framework we have delineated above, rather than indulging the impossible (albeit interesting) breadth and depth a truly comprehensive treatment of these issues would require. Such an approach is well-suited to the task at hand and will allow us to avoid missing the forest for the trees. Bearing all the above in mind, if our work is sufficiently cogent, a full and genuine return to Socrates’ famed dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living” will have been initiated.⁴

⁴Plato, *The Apology*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Cambridge: Internet Classics Archine, 2009), 38a.

II. Authenticity

It is difficult to conceptually analyze authenticity in the way that we would analyze, say, justice, due in part to its highly relational character. Indeed, authenticity cannot exist in a vacuum: Without the notion of *inauthenticity*, it loses all sense of meaning. Of course, one could argue that justice too depends on a co-arising knowledge of *injustice*; but in the latter case, the relationship is far less pronounced, at least in origin and intention. Furthermore, the difficulty in nailing down a fixed understanding of authenticity becomes even more obvious when we consider the implications of that relational nature as it turns on the individual in question. In some sense, authenticity stems so immediately from the individual that it becomes difficult to understand it except in negative terms, or what it is not. Still, a common *spirit* or orientation may be teased out if nothing else. This orientation, which obviously can and will manifest itself in myriad ways depending on the relevant context of the agent in question, is fundamentally a turn *inward* to that which is always with us. Although informed through dialogue with our respective environments, this internal wisdom does not depend on further resources beyond that which we have at our present disposal by virtue of being human to respond adequately, though its guidance can often prove helpful if properly integrated. It calls to mind the myth of the hero's journey: a constant discovery, navigation, and interpretation of our respective worlds, in which the landscape is constantly shifting so that the only invariant constraint is death. This inward orientation will, with any luck, give cohesive form to a life that will, ideally, call forth all thoughts, words, and actions from this consciously chosen seat of self.

In the process of understanding this personal approach on the most universal level possible, two key motifs emerge: desire and ground projects. Evolving from the inward orientation noted above, as well as from a commitment to moment-to-moment awareness to meet the subtleties of everyday life, desire and ground projects run the gamut of what it means to live in the world given the unique set of concerns and relationships each person possesses. Desire responds to the

fundamental *who*, *what*, and *why* of existence, and ground projects respond to the *when*, *where*, and *how*—although of course there is more overlap than this rigid dichotomy suggests. It is these two motifs, alongside the recurrent themes of subjectivity and presence that give physical form to that we will examine successively in the meat of this paper. Through a critical inquiry into the works of the major figures who have spoken at length about these issues, we will advance an understanding of how these characteristics developed into the working conception of authenticity we will employ moving forward. To the greatest extent possible, we will rely on primary sources of these individual thinkers, opting to contextualize the works as they are, rather than indulge in the interpretation fractals that abound in secondary literature. By weaving these themes and motifs together in their present state, we will glean in greater detail the sense for the ideal they convey.

1. The Men of Authenticity

Speaking in the negative, one could say the authentic individual rejects unconscious compliance with external authority. At its most essential, authenticity advocates a return to the individual as the source of what matters and how it matters.⁵ By examining the following thinkers, we will get a sense for how our present understanding of authenticity has trickled down through the ages.

A. Kierkegaard

In the early 1830s, Søren Kierkegaard began his personal search for authenticity which, somewhat ironically, would spearhead a tradition that has continued to flourish since its inception, carrying with it a continuity of style and orientation, if not content. In what is perhaps the quintessential statement of the authentic individual groping his way through life, Kierkegaard remarks on his desperate attempt to break from the Hegelian tradition's emphasis (shared by much

⁵ Granted, authenticity's historical roots could be said to stretch all the way back to Descartes and his "I" centered approach, though it was not until Kierkegaard that the methodology was (Plato, Apology 2009) allowed to spread out by ceasing to place the use of abstract reasoning over and above all other sources of knowledge.

of philosophy in his day) on the pursuit of knowledge in favor of the pursuit of something more essential and intimate to Kierkegaard himself: “The crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die.”⁶ This primacy of subjective truth over objective truth became Kierkegaard’s primary preoccupation for the remainder of his life. Indeed, in the same journal entry, he further remarks on his aim: “to lead a complete human life and not merely one of understanding, so that I should not...base the development of my thought upon...something that is called objective...but upon something which grows together with the deepest roots of my life.”⁷ It is hard to understate just how radical a break from the contemporary history of Western philosophy Kierkegaard’s thought represented. In an era in which philosophy was conjoined with science to the greatest extent possible, a resuscitation of the Ancient Greek ideal⁸ that it is the individual who is the primary subject of concern, rather than the principles and metaphysical truths that he was expected to embody, was the ultimate triumph in the face of philosophy’s unconscious trend toward self-alienation of those it claimed to apply to.

We can already see quite early on in his journal entries, haphazardly dashed off, that the central maxim of his philosophy was beginning to take shape: “One must learn to know himself before knowing anything else. Not until a man has inwardly understood himself and then sees the course he is to take does his life gain peace and meaning.”⁹ These early writings, however, would not be sufficient to understand Kierkegaard’s thought without at least mentioning his subsequent critique of inauthentic modes of living.¹⁰ In these later writings, Kierkegaard would stress the leveling effect that society seemed to press on the unsuspecting, citing it as the primary cause for the

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*, ed. Alexander Drew (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), 16.

⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁸ Although Kierkegaard was not directly inspired by the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition as it was known then and understood today, his masters thesis, *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates* shows his great admiration for the Greek thought of that time.

⁹ Ibid, 17. Reference to the Socratic injunction is immediately evident here as well.

¹⁰ Although he is undoubtedly discussing authenticity and inauthenticity in his writings, he also undoubtedly predated the terms themselves.

symptomatic “despair”¹¹ among the masses. What is perhaps Kierkegaard’s most shocking and characteristic leap of faith comes with his conclusion that, ultimately, the way out of this despair is not through an isolated self-overcoming à la Nietzsche, but rather through sublimating the self in service of something greater outside of oneself. For Kierkegaard, of course, this external source was his relationship to God and the Christian Faith, so that the whole of his life was “related to the problem of ‘becoming a Christian,’ with a direct or indirect polemic against the monstrous illusion we call Christendom, or against the illusion that in such a land of ours, all are Christians of a sort.”¹² In some sense, the whole of Kierkegaard’s thought on authenticity can be deduced from this posthumous turn of phrase. There is nothing in authenticity in the most general sense that entails any relationship to Christianity, any religion, or any need to anchor the self in something external in order to escape the characteristic existential despair, as Kierkegaard terms it. Such specifics are best seen as Kierkegaard’s own manifestation of authenticity, consciously chosen and wrestled with against a backdrop of inauthentic and misunderstood *Christianity*, which he charges the masses with blindly following and failing to comprehend, often for a lack of trying.¹³ It is this insight that Kierkegaard has to offer us on the nature of authenticity. Namely, its inherently troubled relationship with unreflective, inauthentic modes of living (indeed, the two arise simultaneously), and its practical, subjective orientation as opposed to the theoretical, objective bent often, though not necessarily, associated with inauthenticity. That said, while we could talk of Kierkegaard endlessly, I believe the above suffices for our purposes of illuminating the origins of authenticity, articulated explicitly.

B. Nietzsche

¹¹ See Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 144.

¹² Soren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, ed. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 5.

¹³ Or so he charges in the *Provocations* (Farmington, PA: The Bruderhof Foundation Inc., 2002), 201: “The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly.”

“God is Dead,”¹⁴ declared Nietzsche, and with this began his sweeping deconstruction of the whole heavenly host of super-physical ethical codes, from the God of Christianity to Kant’s God of Pure Reason. No longer could we rely on otherworldly entities of unbridled power and omnipotence for guidance—instead, argues Nietzsche, we must learn to remake ourselves as the God, challenging us once more to turn within. In many ways, Nietzsche simply runs a parallel project to that of Kierkegaard: Kierkegaard’s despair at the hands of an alienating society is Nietzsche’s loathing for herd instinct;¹⁵ Kierkegaard’s solution in the authentic relationship to God and faith is mirrored in Nietzsche’s idolization of the artist and of nature as key for the full realization of *Zarathustra’s* Übermensch to manifest itself. If Kierkegaard’s response to inauthenticity is centered on a total re-envisioning of our personal relationship with the divine, then Nietzsche’s claim that God is Dead and subsequent complete rejection of transcendence seems diametrically opposed; this difference, however, is only superficial. In both cases, these two pioneers advocate for a uniquely authentic conception of the ideal response to the leveling effect of the masses. It is important to note that neither argues for the supremacy of their personal approach in any objective or logically rigorous sense. The authors depend on emotional appeals and rhetorical flourishes to get their point across, an intentional stylistic decision they viewed as a strength rather than a weakness. That said, to understand that decision as wholesale rejection of a rational foundation for authenticity would be to undersell their thought. Neither Kierkegaard nor Nietzsche were moral relativists in the strict sense—instead, they believed their approach, which turned on a dethroning of reason and sense perception as the only legitimate sources of human knowledge, to be more faithful to specific, further facts regarding the concrete intimacy of the human experience. Often relegated to the margins by the philosophical tradition that came before them, they found these further facts too important to be ignored.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109.

¹⁵ See Ibid, 210. Thus they locate the problem of *inauthenticity* to which the authentic individual must respond in a similar place.

In any case, supremacy of the conscious self-supervision over thoughtless conformity, exemplified by Nietzsche’s aphorism, “every man is a unique miracle,”¹⁶ is upheld and an unofficial tradition is born. Authenticity’s legacy, no longer relegated to a one-off philosophical event, demonstrates both its staying power and versatility with Nietzsche. Though neither thinker would have viewed their respective projects so contingently, the benefits of hindsight allow us to understand both Kierkegaard’s authentic Christian faith and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as the particular *ground projects* they undertook in their drive to live authentically, rather than expressions of some ultimate invariant standard for humanity to aspire to. Whether these thinkers perceived their own ideals so objectively is of little consequence—if authenticity is to be a live option for all (indeed, I see nothing in the term that should preclude such an interpretation), then a greater variability in manifest expression must be allowed for.¹⁷

C. Heidegger

It is not until Heidegger that Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s proto-existentialism begins to take on its form that remains most distinct from the pop psychology notions of authenticity currently present. The transition into Heidegger also marks the first time ‘authenticity’ is explicitly used in that specific form; before, we were only working backwards with shared concepts. While responding to the same basic concern as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche using his own personal terminology,¹⁸ namely that there is something deeply troubling about the way the individual relates to the society at large, both his solution and approaching angle are notably shifted. To that effect, Heidegger remarks that, “temptation, tranquilization, and alienation are distinguishing marks of a

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 201.

¹⁷ As an aside, both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard discuss the concept of eternal recurrence in their writings (though it features more prominently in Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard refers to it as “repetition.” Regardless of the particular ground project endorsed, I think both would agree that to live authentically is to continually consider the possibility of eternal return and to subsequently be at peace with it.

¹⁸ Fittingly, the decision to employ distinct terminology to refer to philosophically similar ideas became a hallmark of writing on authenticity. This trend found perhaps its most opulent expression in Heidegger.

kind of Being called *falling*,” characterized as the automatic response to “the *They*...the way things have been publicly interpreted.”¹⁹ In this case, the *They* stands in as the inauthentic mode of living and falling can be understood as the unconscious relation to the public consciousness rather than one’s own. In a slight departure from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Heidegger takes care to emphasize that falling is not some “bad or deplorable ontic property of which, perhaps, more advanced stages of human culture might be able to rid themselves.”²⁰ Given the necessity of the social world we find ourselves inescapably lodged in, falling with the ‘they’ is something to be worked with rather than fought against; to use Heideggerian terminology, we cannot help but ‘care.’ Ultimately, we reclaim ourselves from this inauthentic mode of existence by relating to *death* as a distinct possibility for ourselves in any given moment rather than a distant event that merely happens to other people. On Heidegger’s account, it is “the ‘they’ [that] covers up what is peculiar in death’s certainty—that it is possible at any moment.”²¹ Of course, we know, upon reflection, that the former is clearly true and yet we live our lives as if truth was contained wholly in the latter. This distinction, interestingly, elucidates the major break Heidegger makes from his predecessors: authenticity has less to do with ‘being true to oneself’ and everything in the world to do with being true to the facts of *existence*, including our ‘thrownness’ into the world in which our preoccupation with practical matters is strikingly conducive to falling.

I am, of course, simplifying the discussion immensely, as it is not my aim to recapitulate the entirety of Heidegger’s ontology, in which authenticity comprises a significant, yet ultimately singular cog in a vast network of interrelated phenomena. The central nugget, as it were, is that while Heidegger’s critique of society runs along similar fault lines to that of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, his response is *much* more universalized. The fact that Dasein took a backseat to Being in his later

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harpers and Row, 1962), 253-254.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 220.

²¹ *Ibid*, 30.

writings should come as no surprise. For Heidegger, the immutable type facts about the world that we find ourselves thrown into are not obstacles to be eschewed, but opportunities to relate and integrate these constraints into our overarching life as a self-chosen way of being. In many ways, this re-conception is far less radical a response than has been proposed in the past. Rather than make a clean break from a profoundly sick and mind-numbing social world, the critique is muted by the claim that society as such cannot be escaped. The best we can do is to learn to relate to our world in a more honest way.

Thus, authenticity is not indicative of some deeper nature to be discovered in an instant as an understanding of one's fate, but rather is uncovered moment-to-moment as our narrative unfolds. Though individual actions and temporally brief ground projects (when balanced against an entire life) may seem disjointed at first blush, Heidegger is quick to note that these events, taken cumulatively, constitute the whole of our being. The unity of a singular life, understood *without* reference to a deeper, more fundamental nature, coupled with the insistence that the individual does not have to reject the social world of the herd in order to live authentically further fill out our notion of authenticity.

D. Sartre

“Man is condemned to be free,” writes Sartre, “and from the moment he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything that he does.”²² Sartre, widely known as authenticity's most fervent advocate (at least early in life), sought to wrestle as much from transcendence as he possibly could. One cannot utter his famed expression, “existence comes before essence”²³ without being struck by the monumental ethical implications entailed by such a claim. Namely, that, in a world where the only value that exists is created by us, our primary point of reference necessarily shifts

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. Philip Mairet, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1957), 295.

²³ *Ibid.*, 289.

from the objective to the subjective. The chain that began with Kierkegaard remains, in a significant sense, unbroken. Building too on Heidegger's notion of 'thrownness,' Sartre comments on our 'facticity'—the set of relevant facts about ourselves and our situation that inform and constrain our action. Unlike Heidegger, however, Sartre places far less emphasis on this facticity, arguing that, as humans, we possess the capability to *transcend* rather than reconcile with these facts. We are radically free to decide (and in effect, create) what is meaningful for our individual selves at will, and it is the whole of our responsibility to do so.

For a man whose magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*, hinged so principally on an inward revolution in the life of the individual, it seems, at first pass, surprising to note that Sartre was far and away the most politically minded and active of the aforementioned thinkers. In some sense, even Sartre himself was convinced that his project centered on the individual had failed: "One cannot be converted alone. In other words, ethics is not possible unless everyone is ethical."²⁴ 'Bad faith,' originally Sartre's critique of individuals who inadvertently deceive themselves by living as if they have a particular, inescapable role or function to fill, slowly evolved into a societal critique. In his later works, Sartre maintained that until society's oppressive power structures were sufficiently addressed, the possibility of the fully authentic individual self-actualizing in isolation remained little more than a fantasy, though an enticing one at that.

Our takeaways from Sartre more or less split the difference in every case: although perhaps not quite as radical as Sartre envisioned it, we are, generally speaking, far freer and far guiltier of living in bad faith than we typically perceive ourselves to be in everyday life. Recognizing this cognitive dissonance can be considered the first step to living authentically. Furthermore, his later emphasis on the interplay between self, others, and systems is vastly important—to remain ignorant of their effects may be to endorse yet another form of bad faith. Despite his eventual shift away

²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

from the latent power of the individual to transform her own life without the input of society, Sartre continued to embrace some of the key *methodological* approaches to ethics that unofficially mark those who came before him; namely, his insistence that it was literary, rather than solely analytic works that would incite his readers to pursue the authentic ideal, regardless of whether it remained perfectly attainable in the final calculation. Thus it should come as no surprise that he affirmed this hierarchical priority toward the end of his life: “I would like [people] to remember *Nausea*, *No Exit* and *The Devil and the Good Lord*, and then my two philosophical works....”²⁵

E. Camus

Incorporating Camus into the fold, we complete our sketch of authenticity as it evolved through the Western philosophical canon.²⁶ Camus, in many ways, seems to complete the circle: he aligns himself, both in his own and my estimations, more closely with his ancestors than with his contemporaries. Though they are responding to the same basic problem (Kierkegaard calls the state ‘despair’ while Camus prefers ‘the absurd’), Camus rejects Kierkegaard’s call to transcendence in favor of absolute immanence: “Between this sky and the faces turned toward it there is nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic, or a religion... no superhuman happiness, no eternity outside the curve of the days.”²⁷ Accordingly, Camus finds fraternity with Nietzsche more readily than any other thinker. Camus’ insistence on embracing the absurdity of living in a world whose meaning, if existent, is humanely impossible to discern, puts him in good company with Nietzsche’s life-affirming *Übermensch*. In other words, although we are unable to free ourselves

²⁵ Max Charlesworth, *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre*, (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1976), 154.

²⁶ Of course, the authors discussed at length above do not constitute everyone who has had something of consequence to say on the matter. For further reading, see Charles Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity* for a descendent treatment and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* for a precursor. Additional thinkers of no less importance include Jacob Golomb, Erich Fromm, and Alessandro Ferrara among others. Far from being utterly insignificant, these thinkers have expanded on (or, in the case of Rousseau, alluded to) the notion of authenticity in several meaningful ways; chief among them are objections and subsequent responses to the ideas developed above in the main body. In the interest of sticking to what is and has been most essential, original, and influential, I have chosen to limit my primary discussion to the five thinkers above.

²⁷ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 90. From *Nuptials*, one of Camus’ earliest works.

from “this desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion,”²⁸ the appropriate response is not to evade the dilemma by means of a comforting, yet ultimately escapist approach (religion at best, suicide at worst), but rather to accept the absurd in the subtlest shades of gray and confusion. By rejecting out of hand all transcendent solutions to immanent concerns, Camus reaffirms the central motif of authenticity: only we, as subjects, are fit to confront the difficulties and paradoxes of existence—no suitable system for navigating these stormy seas can or could possibly exist. In the spirit of completing the circle, his penchant for writing both philosophical and literary works reaffirms the central methodological conviction from Kierkegaard through Sartre: philosophy without fiction is dead words; fiction without philosophy is trivial amusement.

2. Main Themes of Authenticity

A. Pathos

The notion which is the object of our search has just been introduced and traced back through its historical origins. Along the way, a few key concepts have been teased out. Namely, a subjective vantage point to base our inquiry; the presence of mind required to conduct that inquiry in full awareness of its drives, origins, and implications; the primacy of *ground projects* as the practical, visible manifestation of our inquiry and efforts to live authentically; and the role of authenticity within society and the relationship between the authentic individual and the greater whole. To the foundation these thinkers have constructed, we will add another layer still by integrating the essential phenomenon of *desire* as the manner that our authenticity reveals itself to us. While further expanding on the above themes and motifs in the proceeding sections we must bear in mind that, at this point, our intention is merely to elucidate what the virtue of authenticity consists in rather than to lay it down as a prescription.

²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 53.

The only recurring methodological approach presented above that is too out of place to warrant more attention in our exploration is the penchant for literary flair that so many shared. These fictional appeals, employed liberally, were designed to persuade by means of *pathos* over *logos*.²⁹ Authenticity's inaugural Hall of Fame class was not so naïve as to think that they could rationally argue for the absolute moral superiority of authentic living without trading off for an unacceptable degree of freedom and flexibility that made the notion so attractive to begin with. To that effect, Sartre, undertaking a project that I believe all of the aforementioned writers would advocate for, set out to “repudiate the spirit of seriousness” which “considers values transcendent givens independent of human subjectivity.”³⁰ Put otherwise, he recognized the futility of attempting to uphold the authentic life as the ultimate standard of virtue, equally as much as he would argue that Kant's categorical imperative is founded on a delusion—that delusion, of course, being the spirit of seriousness. I will save a deeper examination of the spirit of seriousness for later in this paper, but for now let it suffice to say that for these thinkers, the deeper emotional, intuitive appeal did not take an ideological backseat to the strictly logical, rational approach that philosophy has traditionally consigned itself to. This is only further evidenced by the fact that, at the ends of their respective lives, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were personally much more satisfied with their individual appeals than were Heidegger and Sartre with the more universal projects they attempted to set out. Of course, this is not to say that the philosophers in question lacked rational underpinning for their views; but rather that they acknowledged, given what we know about the human subject, that the *logos* does not, in and of itself, occupy a space any more privileged as the vehicle for philosophical truth than appeals to other method. (And in fact, with respect to authenticity, it may not sufficiently shake us out of our unreflective tendencies to have the effect it so desires—but more on that deeper

²⁹ The notable exception to this, of course, is Heidegger, though his respect and admiration for art, poetry in particular, is undeniable. See Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought* for more detailed thoughts.

³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), 626.

into the paper.) That my own inquiry into authenticity should be so resolutely analytic rather than literary is admittedly somewhat regrettable. Given the nature of the beast, however, I must be satisfied to let clarity and a lucid awareness of the irony of my own situation stand in where an emotional appeal may be lacking.

B. Subjectivity

Having dispensed with our literary concerns, let us return to that inward orientation we have been frequently mentioning. In our opening remarks on authenticity, we noted the dilemma that many thinkers who preceded us were confronted with when attempting to articulate a full bodied, consistent notion of authenticity. Although efforts to sketch a positive picture of authenticity were fraught with difficulty, the solution resolved even more problems than were originally posed, because it allowed us to simultaneously illuminate the other central relationship present, namely, that between the individual and society. Despite the authentic individual's emphasis on a complete turn toward subjectivity as the origin of meaning and significance, they never forgot what they were reacting against and what provided the raw materials for seekers of authenticity to reclaim and appropriate in a more personal way. The social world provides the backdrop through which the individual struggles to ground himself in what ultimately matters *to him* and not as the result of some unconscious mechanism pulling the strings. That man and society are inevitably related is hardly a debatable fact. Even the most seemingly spontaneous free acts and thoughts of the individual are generated out of and in response to a set of unique stimuli present in one's external environment. For all its emphasis on subjectivity as the starting point and rampant individualism that superficially seems to follow from it as the most admirable personal way of life, construing the search for authenticity as a primarily solitary affair is an understandable misstep. Our social world is created at birth through our inevitable relationship with, at the bare minimum, a mother, and likely continues to expand and contract in varying degrees of intensity until death. Viewed thusly, *that* our personal

relationship with society exists is a brute fact. *How* we relate to our social world is constantly up for grabs, however, and here authenticity finds its foothold as a possible orientation for that relationship. We have been given the picture with the black-and-white lines already etched in place; it is our responsibility, or rather our *privilege* to color the picture with whatever combination of the rainbow that suits our fancy.

To further add shading to this notion, let us examine the work of Bernard Williams who, rather unusually among contemporary Anglophone philosophers, spoke out against the prevailing ethics of his (and our) time. Although he betrays his Greek sympathies from time to time, he certainly falls short of a vigorous defense of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and thus finds a compatriot in Nietzsche, among others, in light of his penchant to argue negatively in the process. That is, he attempts to revise ethics by decrying the woes of both consequentialism and deontology without offering something substantive to fill the hole left in their wake. In the bulk of his writings, a sustained critique of each of these ethical systems can be found. These critiques, however, are in truth only more specialized applications of a broader and equally devastating attack on moral systemization more generally, including its insistence on abusing the moral *ought* (used categorically, though not necessarily referencing Kant) when, instead, “It would be most reasonable to drop it... You can do ethics without it, as is shown by the example of Aristotle.”³¹ The men of authenticity, thus identified, too have emphatically demonstrated that the moral *ought* is no more necessary for ethics than it is helpful, a point that we hope to show convincingly by the end of this paper. Likewise, the impartial ethical systems seem unacceptable to Williams for precisely the same reason:

³¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 33 (1958): 8. Anscombe, largely credited with reviving the virtue ethics tradition, precluded Williams on several key ethical issues, though certainly not all or even most of them.

“The... undertaking has never succeeded, and could not succeed, in answering the question, *by what right* does it legislate the moral sentiments?”³²

C. Ground projects

Williams, however, is not satisfied by merely raising the metaethical concerns just mentioned, which we will address in greater detail later in this paper. He also raises another, perhaps more interesting, *practical* concern about the ability of these moral theories to accomplish what they set out to do. To wit, “There cannot be any very interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is, nor... can there be an ethical theory... [that] will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning,”³³ because these ethical theories simply demand too much of the individual. Regardless of the demands imposed on us by either deontological or consequentialist moral theories, they will inevitably fail to supersede the importance of our own “ground projects”³⁴ to us (and, on the off chance that they do, it seems more reasonable to say that adhering to, say, Kantian moral theory is one of *our* ground projects more so than that it is a genuine glimpse into the moral underpinnings of our universe applied universally without exception). These “ground projects provide the motive force which propels [us] into the future, and gives [us] a reason for living.”³⁵ Yet the essential characteristics of these ground projects are inherently soft and flexible. They are not necessarily self-centered or at odds with the ground projects of others, in the sense that we must claim sole ownership over their expressed content. Rather, these ground projects are ours in the sense that they are consciously chosen *by* us, *for* us: they have to mean something *to* us, they have to matter.

Notably, this sort of approach is directly at odds with the straightforward prescriptions of both consequentialism and deontology, among other moral systems that are less forgiving of deviance and nuance. The consequentialist would be forced to give up her ground projects in the

³² Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), x.

³³ *Ibid*, ix-x.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 13.

name of maximizing utility; the deontologist would have to respect persons' autonomy impartially without regard to the specific individuals involved. A few examples should help to clarify and substantiate this claim. To invoke the moral dilemma we posed at the outset of this paper, if we picture the young man as having a ground project, then the prior dilemma becomes a non-issue. Let's say his ground project, in that moment, was to avenge his brother's death. A Kantian might appeal to a universal maxim against killing our fellow man, or even against revenge more generally. A utilitarian might conjure up a balance sheet of pluses and minuses, determining that he ought to remain with his mother since his lack of military expertise would most surely result in his quick demise and additional anguish for his mother. And yet, in spite of their prescriptions to the contrary, he heads to the Western front anyway to live out the truth of his ground project and attempt to do right by his brother. Another, more domestic (yet no less consequential) example that accentuates the uncertainty factor: It is easy to conceive of a woman, raised in a conservative religious household, who has now been impregnated during a one night stand. As a first-generation college student, she is now faced with the decision of whether to drop out of school to raise the child, give it up for adoption, or have an abortion. How could either the consequentialist or the deontologist have anything helpful to say on the matter? Surely, a young girl of 18 could not be expected to hand down a universal maxim regarding abortion. Perhaps a maxim could be formulated not to lie to your parents—though she knows they would surely disown her were they to learn she had an abortion. Or, perhaps, the true overriding maxim is to act in the best interest of the child—this is where the consequentialists come into play, though they will be equally frustrated in their attempt to hand down a suitable judgment. Given the barest of facts she finds herself equipped with, it is resolutely inconceivable that a human being could have any hope of determining what course of action would bring about the best consequences. Of course, we could continue this speculation endlessly, though I take it the reader has a firm enough impression of the complexity of her situation to understand

just how wrongheaded an appeal to moral theory would be given the circumstances. Now, suppose for a moment, that we had known from the outset that her ground project had been to make her parents proud by becoming the first person in her family to graduate with a college degree. Though far from an open and shut case, for the first time her plight seems a little less opaque—the primacy of her own ground projects illuminates a way forward when impartial morality could not. In other words, the rightness or wrongness of the given theory amounts to naught in light of her practical predicament.

Consequently, the ideals imposed by moral theory are burdensome indeed. In fact, they are ideals so burdensome, Williams maintains, that it becomes conceivably *irrational* for us to pain ourselves to realize it: “There can come a point at which it is quite unreasonable for a man to give up, in the name of good ordering of the world of moral agents, something which is a condition in of his having any interest in being around in that world at all.”³⁶ Here, we can see Williams shifting the conversation away from pure theory to the way in which people *actually* behave as social beings in and of the world.

Thus, the issue that Williams is foregrounding here is another *practical* concern regarding human *motivation*. Despite the litany of far flung thought experiments proposed by moral philosophers over the past several decades that suggest otherwise, ethics has always been and will remain a branch of *practical* philosophy. Given our stated goal of informing the ultimate question, “How should I live?”, it seems obvious that frequent reflection on how their intellectual endeavors are touching base with “real concerns that animate our ordinary ethical experience”³⁷ would be an ethicist’s top priority. The “arid, ahistorical, second-order”³⁸ debates that academic philosophy seems not only to tolerate but to endorse, however, tell a different story that rings like the sound of

³⁶ Ibid, 14.

³⁷ A. W. Moore, “Obituary of Bernard Williams (1929-2003),” *Philosophy Now*, 2003.

³⁸ Ibid.

a cracked bell. As Williams himself put it, while “most moral philosophy at most times has been empty and boring...contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all.”³⁹ I can only imagine that Williams had the infamous Trolley problem⁴⁰ (and its ever-proliferating derivatives) in mind when making such a statement. More to the point, if Williams made a special effort to highlight the practical concern of human motivation over and above the watertight structures of deontology and consequentialism, we can be assured that he did so for good reason. Namely, he understood that, at the end of the day, it is the individual who must sit alone in a room with himself. If he is to maintain his *integrity* (to use Williams’ term), then he must recognize the primacy of the ground “projects and attitudes with which he is most closely identified,”⁴¹ and act accordingly. To do so is to simultaneously move in the direction of authenticity, for the individual in question is no longer under the spell of the “peculiar institution” and has begun to think for himself. Fittingly, motivation, particularly personal motivation, the likes of which energize the ground projects Williams is so fond of, is of vital importance to a fully fleshed out notion of authenticity. Although he never wrote on authenticity at length in any direct sense, it comes as no surprise that Williams leaned on it to sum his philosophical work shortly before his death: “If there’s one theme in all my work it’s about authenticity and self-expression.... The whole thing has been about spelling out the notion of inner necessity.”⁴² It is this ‘inner necessity’ that we shall examine next.

D. Desire

Fortunately, Williams opted to clear away the rubble left in the aftermath of completely razing the structures of both consequentialism and deontology. Underneath, we find an untouched earth ripe with potential, upon which we hope to keep clear of artificial debris in order that our

³⁹ Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), xvii.

⁴⁰ See Philippa Foot, *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect* for the original problem. See also Judith Thomson, Francis Kamm, and Peter Unger, among others, for a variety of alternative derivatives.

⁴¹ J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 116-117.

⁴² Stuart Jefferies, “The Quest for Truth,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2002. Interview with Bernard Williams.

ground projects might flourish without the need of new foundations and structures of their own. (In fact, I can think of nothing more detrimental to the enterprise!) Despite what the name ‘ground projects’ suggests, however, there seems to exist something more fundamental to our motivation than even they can convey, a deeper sort of ‘bedrock projects,’ if I may. For to consider a ground project tacitly raises the further question: how do we determine our ground projects? Is it a meandering process of discovery, an *amor fati* à la Nietzsche? A somewhat arbitrary yet entirely self-willed creative pursuit à la Sartre? Or something else entirely? I think the technique lies most reliably in the space between the two poles of fate and freedom, in our fundamental experience of *desire*. At last, I believe, we tapped into the well’s source from which authenticity springs. Both immediately recognizable by every human being who has ever lived and yet, by its very nature, concealed from others’ direct experience, desire occupies a strange phenomenological space. This strangeness, however, is precisely the characteristic which affords it such privileged status for insight into ourselves and what we truly are at bottom.

Our desires, then, are a primary sensation to be recognized and attuned to, rather than consciously willed from out of nothingness or compelled to transform from their opposite (we cannot, for instance, in an instant, will that we root for the Red Sox over the Yankees any more than we can will our preference for polyamory to monogamy). They offer us the most direct perception by which we can begin to understand what “things are in some real sense really you, or express what you [are] and [what] others aren’t,” to borrow a phrase from Williams.⁴³ Here, ‘things’ is broadly understood to signify our fundamental desires, and ‘others’ are the rogue ideologies that slip into our headspace unannounced and fool us into behaving in ways contrary to our desires. To expand upon the example touched on above, constant bombardment by social programming may lead us to a place where we repress our innate desire for multiple partners in favor of the till-death-do-us-part

⁴³ Ibid.

sermon preached by both mainstream religious and secular dogma. In order to further their own agenda and cultural biases, these extended family organizations would have us believe that there is only one proper way to conduct our lives, and they hold the code to decipher it, when, in fact, we alone are the individuals privileged with this choice. The simplest explanation for desire's elite status is the way in which it makes itself known to us: It is felt by us intuitively and cannot be reasoned to by means of logical analysis alone. It is precisely desire's position at the bedrock of our awareness that effectively shields it from a whole host of cognitive biases to which our reasoning is constantly susceptible, and subsequently acquaints us with the source of what will ultimately lead us to greater satisfaction: the functioning toward the gratification of our desires. These cognitive biases not only enable us to convince ourselves of facts that are not true⁴⁴ but further serve to rope those same facts off from further questioning. Writers as diverse as Wittgenstein ("nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself"⁴⁵) to science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein ("man is not a rational animal; he is *rationalizing* animal"⁴⁶) have remarked on man's Achilles heel: using his own intellect to outsmart himself, with the most destructive effects of this rationalization occurring when we mistake an emotive response for a logical one—Jonathan Haidt's work on moral dumbfounding, a phenomenon by which people dogmatically insist on a moral judgment which, upon deeper reflection, they cannot justify, is an excellent example of this.⁴⁷ By calling a spade a spade, we are honest with ourselves about where the source of our motivation actually *is* rather than where we would like it to be. In other words, it is only by attempting to understand our deepest impulses, rather than unconsciously misleading ourselves with unrecognized social programming, that we can begin to fulfill a deep need for our lives to be meaningful—and, as people everywhere can attest to

⁴⁴ The process by which Sartre's 'spirit of seriousness' begins to take hold.

⁴⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 34.

⁴⁶ Robert A. Heinlein, *Assignment in Eternity* (Wake Forest, NC: Baen, 2000). My emphasis.

⁴⁷ See Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Reasoning," *Psychological Review* 108.4 (2001), 814-834.

simply by having lived, functioning toward the gratification of desire is nothing if not meaningfully engaging by its very nature.

Bearing the above in mind a few difficulties still rise to the fore. In our efforts to discern authentic desires from ideological mirages, we must take care not to become overly reductionist in our treatment of desire, to the point where the sensation is degraded past what is accurate or beneficial with respect to authenticity and, in turn, ground projects. Our desires manifest in myriad ways on a wide array of different levels, but if we can peel back the second- and third-order desires like the exterior layers of an onion, we create the possibility of coming into true, unitive knowledge of ourselves and what propels us forward. Given a deep and conscious awareness of ourselves and our motives, our further investigations will affirm our most surface level desires as fully integral to each subsequent layer below it, all the way down to the core. More often than not, however, we will notice how our most particular desires are merely contingent on something more cardinal. For instance, say that we identify what we take to be an insatiable desire to have children, a desire so powerful that our lives would be irreparably tainted were we to ignore this most maternal (or paternal) urge. Now, like I suggested, it may be, upon more careful probing, that this desire truly is the bottommost level, but such a conclusion hardly suffices for the reality of the situation.⁴⁸ Suppose instead that the desire to have children, for some people, is merely a manifestation of a deeper desire to live a meaningful life. For simplicity's sake, I'll halt the desire fractal here, but even a treatment this limited is enough to show just how complicated an exercise such as this could become, not to mention how illuminating. For to unveil a more essential level throws light onto the contingency of the higher-order desire that was itself just taken as essentially unconditional. In the preceding parenting scenario, it emerges that raising children is not actually our ground project in the way that

⁴⁸ Though the literature on the subject is regrettably sparse, anecdotal evidence abounds with stories of parents who, despite previously held desires to the contrary, despise (Haidt 2001) their children. Regardless of whether some sort of trend can be deduced from this insufficient data, the fact that such people exist at all is not controversial and prompts further inquiry.

Williams would define it.⁴⁹ Instead, we find ourselves freed up, as it were, to see ourselves in terms of a multitude of novel ground projects that otherwise would have gone unexamined and dismissed as not being live options when in truth they always were—it was simply our rationalizing mind endorsing dogmatism with no checks. The key here then is to discover that desire within us which is not contingent and build from there. The worry, of course, is that we will never truly achieve certainty regarding which of our desires is bedrock and which are merely conditional. To the extent that we are engaged in practical endeavors, absolute certainty will most likely evade us, but again, this is something of a blessing in disguise. Complete conviction is the hallmark of dogmatic, ideologically driven thinking, and by opting to question the deeper nature of our so-called desires, we resurrect the possibility of unmasking them when they are not what they profess themselves to be, and doubling down on our efforts in a more intelligent manner when they are. Whether such a move will provide satisfaction in the long term is questionable; what is less controversial, however, is whether it will imbue his life with a sense of purpose, meaning, and non-arbitrary direction.

Aristotle employs a similar process in his search for the highest Good at which all things aim: “So if what is done has some end that we want for its own sake...then clearly this will be the good, indeed the chief good,”⁵⁰ where *done* is functionally equivalent to *desired*. Our inward quest for fundamental desires, then, can be helpfully viewed as a repurposing of his original method for desire’s ends understood broadly rather than *eudaimonia*. The crucial difference, of course, being that Aristotle’s project was envisioned as a catch-all solution for man *qua* man searching for guidance on how to live the good life, whereas authenticity (and the desire, ground projects and subjective orientation we have been discussing presently) only makes sense within the context of the *individual’s* life. Regardless of whether unique individuals arrive at identical conclusions concerning their desires (indeed, given our remarkably similar genetic makeup, I suspect, like Aristotle, that convergences

⁴⁹ “Provide the motive force which propels [us] into the future, and gives [us] a reason for living.”

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4 (1094a).

will be more plentiful than our divergences, having shed enough layers), it is the *personal process* of discerning them that is vital to the conclusions having any motivational impact on us. More to the point, regardless of where our investigations lead us, *how* we choose to go about implementing our ground projects is arguably of even greater significance. And this is precisely where authenticity comes into play.

E. The interplay of desire and ground projects

To sum, if fundamental desires are our compass and ground projects our destination, then authenticity is the mode of transportation we choose to get there. Through this metaphor, desire's primacy becomes obvious: not only is it our most effective source of energy in the sense that it starts the wheels churning, but it orients us in the proper direction as well. One cannot hope to live authentically or engage in ground projects that don't stink of arbitrariness without becoming fully in touch with his most intrinsic desires. This does not, however, imply that authenticity must take a backseat to desire or, especially, to ground projects. If anything, it puts us *back* in the driver's seat, operating, as we are, with the understanding that authenticity manifests itself as the prevailing *attitude* through which we engage our lives or the all-pervasive thematic element that provides a degree of integrity to a normally fragmented life. On this account, then, the art of living authentically (for it is indeed an art and not a science) places much less emphasis on Kierkegaard's "idea for which I am willing to live and die,"⁵¹ or a Nietzschean discovery of our ultimate fate by which we can orient ourselves once and for all. In this light, both Kierkegaard's 'idea' and Nietzsche's fate are better understood as *ground projects* than as authentic living, given the static nature of ground projects that does not square well with our lived experience of desire and authenticity's fluidity.

Though precisely articulating our ground projects has its perks, namely that we increase our likelihood of manifesting them, it has its drawbacks as well: we run the risk of becoming unreceptive

⁵¹ For source, see footnote 6.

to shifts in *source*, that is, in the reason why we adopted them in the first place. A characteristic unreceptivity to shifts in source, or desire, leads us to suffer the misconception that there is nothing new to discover and that our ground projects are fixed. This misconception stems, in turn, from further misconceptions that we *need* to find a singular answer to clear up all of our existential ponderings for good, have everything figured out beyond a shadow of a doubt before we can proceed, and generally *dominate* our lives rather than working with them when such a consolidated and controlling relationship to our ground projects is simply not necessary. The notion of ‘finding’ a vocation is a telling example of this unfortunate misperception: As children, we may have hoped to be firefighters, baseball players, doctors, astronauts. While skill and a lack of resources may have contributed to the wilting of many of these dreams as we outgrew adolescence, I would argue that we far more simply outgrew the dream itself, a development universally perceived as exceedingly ordinary and even healthy as we adjust our ground projects to meet our shifting desires. Given that “every man is the sum total of his reactions to experience,” as Hunter S. Thompson so eloquently puts it, it follows that “as [our] experiences differ and multiply, [we] become different [people], and hence [our] perspective changes.”⁵² This sentiment, however, construed as a hallmark of common wisdom with reference to children, seemingly becomes lost with age as our *hubris* dictates that we can and inevitably will someday arrive at a point in time when we solve our life’s ultimate riddle like a stereogram.⁵³ The expectation that the average student will graduate college with her life plan etched in stone is at least implicitly stated at the outset. Yet that same student has an 80 percent likelihood of changing her major *at least* once before graduation.⁵⁴ Are we to think that the vision for

⁵² Hunter S. Thompson, “Hunter S. Thompson on Finding Your Purpose,” *YFH*, May 6, 2014, Accessed February 1, 2017, <https://yourfriendshouse.com/uncategorised/hunter-s-thompson-on-finding-your-purpose/>.

⁵³ The common myth that the average American cycles through seven career changes during their life is debunked here, the unscrupulous nature of which only furthers our point: Carl Bailik, “Seven Careers in a Lifetime? Think Twice, Researchers Say,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 4 2010, accessed February 1 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704206804575468162805877990>.

⁵⁴ University of Northern Iowa Office of Academic Advising: Changing Majors, accessed February 1, 2017, <https://uni.edu/advising/changing-majors>. Data taken from the National Center for Education Statistics.

the future our typical graduate holds is, in some significant and meaningful sense, any less arbitrary than the one he envisioned four years prior, or even as a child for that matter? I think not. Far more likely is that this vision for the future (indeed, *any* vision for the future) and the ground projects we hold dear are little more than a snapshot of the present moment, and to treat them as the “X” at the end of the long and illustrative journey to the proverbial treasure chest is to do our future selves a grave disservice. This disservice, of course, repeats itself across the whole run of temporal scales from birth until death.

Given that we are compelled to discard ground projects as our ultimate reference point for living meaningful lives, are we consequently doomed to grope about unmoored in our perpetual search for Shangri-La? To end the search on such a hopeless note would be cruel and, more importantly, unnecessary. As the Buddha said, “If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so,” and I intend to follow in the spirit of this imperative.⁵⁵ The real trouble with the approach just explicated, as we have stated, is that the unskillful means of prioritizing ground projects over desire and authenticity is akin to putting the cart before the horse. For the analytically inclined, the rough formula of *why* + *how* = *what* may prove illuminating, wherein *why* is our desire, *how* is our authenticity manifesting itself, and *what* are our ground projects. From this picture, it is crucial to note that *why* and *how* operate symbiotically, and yet both have their own distinct sphere of influence in our psyche. *Why* explains, or is the explanation; *how* evokes. *Why* gives us the reason; *how* provides the method and action. On this model, the *why* is self-evident, in the sense that although it does the explaining, it is, at its deepest and most unfiltered levels, unexplainable and unalterable by any further phenomenon. These first-order desires, which we are called to recognize and understand, furnish us with all of the intimate knowledge of ourselves that we need in order to move in the direction toward our highest sense of meaningfulness. The *how*, however, presents itself much more

⁵⁵ Paraphrase of the Kusala Sutta in *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), 159. The entire Sutta is relevant and worth reading.

ambiguously, and thus we have a much greater say on shaping the energy or the process it gives form to. All the reasons in the universe are ultimately hollow if they do not, by their very presence, compel us to act in accordance with them. Consequently, we want to act in such a way as to proffer the manifestation of our ground projects that arises from what we uncover about our desires, with ‘act’ here being understood in the broadest sense of the word—indeed, we are ‘acting’ all the time, even when we scarcely realize it, and just as the processes of our lives are continuous, so too does the truly authentic individual never rest in the sense that he is constantly triggering the experience of what he understands as his primary goal beyond that which can be comprehended on a merely conceptual level. It is not enough to rely solely on rationality—other, more intuitive sources of knowledge must be explored before the authentic individual can claim to have given the situation a fair shake.

Bearing that in mind, a somewhat lengthy qualifier must be investigated before proceeding. Namely, the possibility that desire need not play a central, guiding role in an authentic individual’s life—for it seems altogether plausible that an individual could, following conscious deliberation on the source of her motives, settle on demoting desire’s primacy in favor of adopting a Kantian model, an Aristotelian model, or any other such system of ethics requiring limited input from the user. This apparent degradation of desire, however, is only skin deep, and turns on an inadvertent conflation of reason and desire; regardless of the preexisting system endorsed, it seems inconceivable that any such system in question could be affirmed through a mechanism other than *desire*. Even if the supposed appeal of a given system is its correspondence with literal truth, such an affirmation still depends on the individual desiring and valuing truth in her life. That is, in a world without value-laden givens, even the most innocuous of reason-based decision making is undergirded by a desire to align one’s life with a correspondence theory of truth. The degree to which this desire is explicitly

verbalized remains of little consequence, and desire retains its importance, albeit, at times, unconsciously.

So much for one sort of worry. As for worries of a second sort, on the account we have been charting, the apprehension of desire seems to notably limit the freedom that the authentic individual can operate under, since his range of options will be necessarily constrained by that which he desires, a further fact that he has little say over. *Prima facie* this seems to undermine the radical sense of freedom that makes authenticity so attractive in the first place. To adopt this view, however, would be to fall into the spirit of seriousness Sartre set out to dismantle in *Being and Nothingness*. In the technical sense of the term, we are of course in no way *obligated* to act in accordance with our desire, or what Sartre would call our facticity: “I find an absolute responsibility for the fact that my facticity is immediately inapprehensible” in the sense that our facticity “always appear[s] across a projective reconstruction of my for-itself.”⁵⁶ To completely ignore our desires (which, as we have shown, offer the clearest window into our authentic self), however, would be to fall prey to a vicious cycle of arbitrariness that appears to undercut the entire void authenticity hopes to fill by making the entire endeavor devoid of meaning entirely. Charles Taylor reiterates the point in response to the soft-relativists who he thinks simultaneously represent authenticity’s most visible and misguided proponents: “I couldn’t just *decide* that the most significant action is wiggling my toes in warm mud. Without a special explanation, this is not an intelligible claim.”⁵⁷ In the true spirit of authenticity, we must maintain some semblance of a middle ground if we hope to avoid the meaninglessness just spoken of. While we are not in a position to create our desires *ex nihilo*, we are granted the capability of viewing ourselves as the preeminent *interpreters* of our own lives, to the extent that our interpretation is informed, though not caged, by desire. By discovering what is meaningful and important and to what degree, we reclaim our sense of freedom and rescue our

⁵⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1993), 710.

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 36.

desires from vagueness and standardization. Furthermore, upon closer inspection the issue of radical freedom starts to look rather superficial anyway. To use a particularly outrageous example that nonetheless drives the point home, we are not meaningfully hindered by the fact that we are unable to reproduce with orangutans any more than we find our wings clipped by this confrontation with desire, since in both cases the act in question was not something that we were interested in doing in the first place. On the quest for authenticity, aligning ourselves with our first-order desires is in our best interest, and to interpret their course as precisely as possible seems fortuitous for us as well, if we are to have any hope of realizing them. Indeed, what could be more authentic than defining winning and losing on our own terms by consciously choosing how we live our lives amidst a sea of conflicting ideas and stimuli?

F. Presence

The real key lies in the notion of being responsive to the *here* and *now*, and this requires an extraordinarily quick and supple mind to respond adeptly to these potential changes. The emphasis on a quick mind is absolutely essential, especially in the context of desire. Simple observation will reveal that our desires are constantly shifting in both subtle and overt ways; so, we must be careful so as not to idolize a *particular* desire and pursue it blindly, as if it were just another dogma. Given the frequency with which it transforms, we run the very real risk of chasing something that is no longer related to our larger project of manifesting authentically if we are not regularly reevaluating the accuracy of our internal compass. Desire, it seems, is a bit of a mongrel; consequently, authenticity, understood from moment-to-moment, has no more loyalty to the past than it does to the unconscious decision making it repudiates. Naturally, I think, we will find that our lives do contain a continuous narrative thread to reference, but this link is as tenuous as anything else we have examined.

As with much of this project, we find a close compatriot in Aristotle. Although Aristotle's 'highest good' might be better viewed through the lens of D.H. Lawrence's "deepest impulse" in the context of our project, both men are essentially pointing at the same thing: the alchemical gold which will color our ultimate search.⁵⁸ Whereas Aristotle would call attention to his own emphasis on *habituation*, the term *practice* seems to evoke more clearly that notion of the *here* and *now* so vital to authenticity's nurturing, as opposed to the degree of mindlessness implied by habit. Even if, for the sake of argument, we concede that habits are rightfully sought after in certain situations, what is to be done in the often lengthy intermediary period while we wait for these habits to form? If the situationist's critique of virtue ethics has shown us anything, it is that the virtuous are both rare and far from the only people who are in constant need of ethical guidance.⁵⁹ The trouble then is twofold: First, the virtues are not *ours* but *mankind's*, and second, they are too manifold to be left undifferentiated. We will take them both in turn.

G. Return to subjectivity

The first trouble is once more motivational—if we have not done anything to begin the transfer of possession from humanity's universal stockpile of concepts to that which holds unique meaning for us in our own moral lexicon, it will do little to aid us during those times which demand the most of us or when our attention is stretched thin and rendered far less responsive. There are many reasons why the Bible has proven more popular and effective than the *Nicomachean Ethics* for guiding behavior, chief among them being the fact that the former's Christian adherents have internalized their Word of God, entered a personal relationship with its teachings, and realized, on both an emotional and a conceptual level, the power and beauty of the words for their individual selves. The words are neither foreign nor patronizing; they have familiarized the language to the

⁵⁸ Stuart Jefferies, "The Quest for Truth," *The Guardian*, November 30, 2002.

⁵⁹ For more on the situationist critique of virtue ethics, see John Doris, "Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics," in *Nous* 32 (1998), 508-530. This is a large issue on which much more can be said, but for our present purposes, I think it does no harm to our discussion to lay it to one side.

point where, in some very meaningful sense, they can be said to have written it themselves. This stands in contrast to Aristotle's contemporarily secular defenders who have a far weaker personal connection with the logic aside from an intellectual understanding and endorsement. On paper, the universality of this doctrine should read as a strength, but in practice it is most certainly a weakness. Given that practical wisdom Aristotle primarily aspires to, this criticism must be adequately responded to if we are to rescue part and parcel of his project: "the present inquiry does not aim at theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use)."⁶⁰ The remedy, I think, is to explore virtues on our own and tame them, as it were, by linking them with desire so as to grant them that motivational import. Our list of commonly accepted values is hopelessly long,⁶¹ and though Aristotle does a nice job of singling out a few that he thinks are of top importance under which the others may be subsumed (e.g. magnanimity, justice, *phronesis*), they remain little more than words until we have internalized them and realized their significance like our Christian has realized the Word of God. Regardless of whether we come to the same conclusions as Aristotle or any other ethicist or religious text for that matter, the sheer fact that we arrived at the conclusion ourselves with eyes wide open makes all the difference— "even by deciding to look, [we] go a long way toward making the choice" to live authentically.⁶²

H. Authenticity in society

Frustratingly for contemporary seekers of authenticity, modern is quite well aligned to thwart our search for the self-awareness and understanding necessary for this authenticity (to say nothing of desire) to flourish. I am referring to the ubiquitous status of *technology* that has, at least in the industrialized West, subsumed us through our consumption of it. Take a moment to ponder: How

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross (Cambridge: Internet Classics Archive, 2009), II, 2 (1103b).

⁶¹ See here for a non-exhaustive list of over 400 values/virtues: <http://www.stevepavlina.com/blog/2004/11/list-of-values/>.

⁶² Hunter S. Thompson, "Hunter S. Thompson on Finding Your Purpose," *YFH*, May 6, 2014, Accessed February 1, 2017, <https://yourfriendshouse.com/uncategorised/hunter-s-thompson-on-finding-your-purpose/>. Emphasis removed.

many hours a day do we spend in front of a computer screen? A phone screen? An automobile windscreen? All three screens combined? How much of our life comes at us through a screen, vicariously? While our personal answer to these questions may revolt us, the truly insidious and silent implication in all this is not what is coming through these screens *at* us but what, because of our near constant exposure to these devices, is being screened *from* us. If what we consume electronically is coming at us externally, filling us up from the outside, then it seems to follow that what is blocked from us is our emotional responsiveness to feelings that are generated from this inside, including desire. These feelings are, in effect, covered up and overridden by the perpetual wave of stimulation that leaves our cognitive faculties little processing power to be aware of the movements of its own content. The non-stop onslaught of symbolic images in both audio and video form serves only to exacerbate these effects and send our minds into a state of relentless motion in which emotions and internal sensations become increasingly confused, manipulated, and subsequently inauthentic. Technology's depersonalizing effect is not a new one, and its now omnipresent presence has served only to intensify this effect.⁶³ Since the literature on the issue is far too vast to adequately survey within the scope of this paper, we will have to settle for intuitive arguments that, I think, will hold up to scrutiny upon further, empirical investigation. Irrespective of this lack of literature, however, the link between our overuse of technology and its detrimental effect on our ability to relate to our lives authentically seems obvious. With such a heavy influx of external stimuli, the mind becomes sedated by the barrage of thoughts that arise as a natural consequence of this consumption pattern. As grandmother used to say, "You are what you eat," which is to say, you are what you *consume*, and this relationship holds true regardless of what enters the body. If we continually gorge ourselves on even the healthiest of foods (the problem with obesity is as much the quantity consumed as the quality), our bodies will grow slow, sluggish, and unable to adequately

⁶³ D. Keller, "Cause—technology; Effect—depersonalization," *Journal of Psychiatric Nursing and Mental Health Services* 13 (1975): 25-26.

react to moving external stimuli in our environment. In much the same way, if we continually gorge ourselves on even the healthiest technology, productivity and self-help articles all included, our minds will grow slow, sluggish, and unable to adequately react to moving *internal* stimuli from the depths of our consciousness. Given the ever-expanding nature of our experience and the requisite shifts in desire that accompany it, only those rich in self-awareness and poor in distraction will have met the necessary conditions for detecting this authentic state within themselves.

It is in light of these growing problems that we must shift our attention if we wish to have any hope of reclaiming the true meaning of authenticity for our individual selves. Though the personalized nature of authenticity limits us from explicitly spelling out the precise characteristics of the authentic individual, we may be, as was stated at the outset, able to stake down the corners of a more general sort, and thereby get a rough sense of where our target lies. We can, at the very least, be sure that the authentic individual's primary frame of reference is herself, given that we are most immediately disclosed to ourselves in a way that others aren't through our subjective experience of *desire*, which offers the content we may construct our lives with. Of course, we are in no way restricted to a narrower band of action through a clear-sighted recognition of this desire; though without some acknowledgment of our desires, we will become hopelessly mired in arbitrariness. This process of relating to our desires and, in turn, our eventual ground projects constitutes the wholeness of authenticity, vague as it may be. Furthermore, it seems clear from our exploration that the authentic individual is in a state of *constant arriving*, the destination impossible to pin down and thus not the point of our inquiry. Authenticity arises moment-to-moment as the natural response to man existing in his environment, and can only be understood from the inside. As such, the authentic individual consciously creates, or should we say *interprets*, his own way of life as he sees fit. He is aware of the influence that external pressure has on him, and consciously chooses to relate to that influence in the way he sees fit, conscious conformity all included.

III. Relation with Ethics

The obscure themes we have tried to delimit amount to this. Having thoroughly illustrated what authenticity consists in, we will now turn to a discussion of why we ought to care—though, as should become demonstrably clear as we proceed, we intend to employ the moral *ought* a tad less emphatically than do many of our predecessors. Before we begin in earnest, it is worth reminding that we are not presenting authenticity in direct competition with classic moral theories (e.g. consequentialism, deontology, etc.). Insofar as a moral theory is charged with the task of providing some sort of evaluative mechanism to determine what makes an act ethical or unethical, authenticity invariably falls short. The hope, however, is that we can take this limitation in stride by showing that authenticity need not aspire to usurp traditional moral theories in order to be of significant interest to the individual inclined to examine her life more fruitfully. It is in this spirit that we present the following analysis of the ways in which authenticity converges with and diverges from the larger ethical tradition.

1. Convergences

Few topics breed such universal interest as ethics. Indeed, for good or ill, nearly every major figure and certainly every major civilization has had something to say on the question of guiding our conduct through life's back roads and freeways. From Hammurabi to the ancient Greeks to the ethics of the East to the melting pot of competing viewpoints held in the world today, ethical considerations exist in a long unbroken chain in which each further iteration cannot be understood without reference to the predominant school of thought that fathered it, as well the inevitable child it spawned, or soon will. This, too, is more than mere coincidence. Given how high the stakes are presumed to be—more obviously for religious ethics in which the fate of an eternity, or at least another life, are to be determined by the conduct in this one, but also for secular ethics in which the life we are living is the only one available to us, to say nothing of the well-being of future

generations so many seem to intrinsically care for—it is no wonder that the ‘how’ of our own lives has occupied a major position, if not the dominant one, in our headspace as long as we have had language to contemplate it.⁶⁴ Regardless of creed or conviction, one thing is certain: Life is inestimable to the living. Barring the odd exception (which exists in every field of inquiry, regardless of subject matter), simple observation confirms this fact, nevermind the near *inconceivability* of a world in which an individual’s highest concern was something other than how he is living his own life. Dress it up in social movements and subservience to a higher power, mask it in abject apathy, conceal it behind the thin veil of altruism—we all return to the same immutable, brute fact. We exist and therefore must, by definition, do something about it; *be* something about it.

It is this unequivocal concern for our lives, in the sense that this concern is the factor of our experience that we are most immediately acquainted with, that drives the *universal* concern for how to live it. It transcends any sort of borders we ever have or ever could dream up; regardless of the answers we are providing, we are all responding to the same basic *question*. While our personal concluding points may be located at different places, these locations to be derived experientially and experimentally, there is no doubt that our starting points of inquiry remain the same. A line from the Rig Veda comes to mind here: “Truth is One, the sages speak of it by many names.”⁶⁵ In much the same way, the essential, bedrock question is but one; the ethicists ask it in many ways. Whether it be Aristotle asking how *one* ought to live, or Kant and Mill questioning which actions are right and wrong *irrespective* of the agent performing them, I maintain that they were, at least initially, concerned with finding answers for how to guide their own conduct—otherwise, they would not have even begun the search at all. The universal code they hoped to prescribe based on their personal musings was simply a bonus. In other words, long before we were interested in the universal, we were

⁶⁴ Of course, it’s no wonder that there exists such widespread disagreement as well, but we have saved that discussion for the proceeding section.

⁶⁵ Translation/interpretation by Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), viii. For the origin in the Rig Veda, see 1.146.46.

hopelessly enthralled with the particular. For all this noble inquiring about what is good and proper for humans *qua* humans, we were (and still are), at best trying to navigate life as well as we can, offering up whatever morsel of generality we think may be helpful for someone aside from ourselves along the way, at worst arrogantly assuming that the conclusions we have reached could not possibly admit of exceptions. For these reasons, the question we pose to begin our inquiry as the most appropriate and fruitful point of departure because it gets to the root of our concern: *How should I live?* Naturally, our ultimate conceptual conclusions are will be determined by experience and experiment, so although our personal revelations will assuredly not arise simultaneously, we can at least be sure that our inquiry begins with similar intent.

2. Divergences

Of course, if it were sufficient to discuss common aspirations alone, then there would be no need to address the subject of authenticity at all. Although we are in some meaningful sense comparing apples to oranges, it will nevertheless behoove us to speak of the differences, since it is here that authenticity's most robust power will present itself. As is custom, a roving eye toward the audience in question will best serve our purposes of delineating authenticity from its contemporaries. More specifically, authenticity's emphasis on *particulars* in all their manifestations, from individual people to circumstances quite remote from the universal flavor of the other leading normative ethical theories.⁶⁶ In other words, it is the way in which the questions are posed rather than the answers the structure provides that set authenticity apart. It is here, in the subtle shift of Socrates' original question to, "How should *one* live?" from, "How should *I* live?" that we will find the novelty of authenticity.⁶⁷ In many ways, authenticity is not so much a normative ethical theory as it is a lack thereof, its common features developing organically more

⁶⁶ Virtue ethics is less susceptible to this charge than are deontology and consequentialism, and can be reliably viewed as a brother-in-arms as easily as it can an opposing force. This nuance will be explored in greater depth later in the section.

⁶⁷ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 4.

often than any top-heavy attempt at systemization. At its fullest realization, it is a collection of motivations and goals as vast as the number of people on the planet, the most flexible of frameworks by which it encapsulates a near 7.5 billion (and counting) unique *ways of life* within its purview. It is through the relevant constraint of the individual, manifesting desires as they blossom into ground projects that authenticity begins to take color and shape.

In an effort to forestall any misunderstanding, a few words on the distinction between *morality* and *ethics* is in order before we proceed to break down the various normative ethical approaches in relation to one another. The observant reader has probably noticed that our use of the term morality has been intentionally sparing thus far, while our employment of the term ethics has been correspondingly abundant. While morality and ethics sometimes tend to occupy a synonymous linguistic space in philosophy, for our present purposes morality can be more helpfully viewed as a subset of ethics, wholly inscribed within the latter's wider circle. More specifically, morality is immediately concerned with the interpersonal dimension of human relations; ethics makes its subject human behavior more generally. Thus, although the topic of morality tends to dominate contemporary discussions (at least among the general population), ethics has historically occupied the broader space. Morality, co-opted most often by deontological and consequentialist traditions, has consequently promoted considerations of duty and obligation, regarded as fringe issues under an ethical lens, to paramount importance. As such, the basic question it attempts to answer is slightly transfigured: "What actions are right and wrong in particular circumstances?"—as opposed to Socrates' question: "How should one live?" Given Socrates' place in history, it should come as no surprise that compared to morality, ethics represents a larger, older tradition beginning with the Greeks rather than the Romans.⁶⁸ Thus, it naturally follows that ethics finds the fullest articulation of its guiding ethos in the virtue ethics tradition. Its emphasis is on the cultivation of our personal

⁶⁸ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 6.

character as opposed to delineating specific courses of action, and as such finds itself as equally at home in the minutiae of daily life as in its most poignant moments. On the classical distinction painted herein, authenticity bears far closer kinship to ethics than morality since it aspires to retain its potential to inform action in the broadest spatiotemporal sense possible. Therefore, our utilization of both terms is, in each case throughout this paper, intentional for conceptual rather than literary concerns.

If the issue just raised was purely semantic, then we might not have bothered to raise it at all. As it stands, however, most classical moral theory's (i.e. consequentialism and deontology) over-commitment to the morality end of the ethics-morality spectrum leaves a large range of actions with potential ethical content unaddressed. Namely, any action undertaken that does not have glaring ethical content (i.e. does not obviously impact the well-being of another) may find moral theory silent on the issue. This is not so much a criticism as it is an observation. After all, a moral theory need not be a practical guide to life; it simply must be true. Consequently, to charge consequentialism, deontology, or even virtue ethics for failing to accomplish what they are not attempting to do would be resolutely unfair. For our present purpose, then, let us take the following observations in the spirit for which they are intended; viz., as a demonstration of authenticity's value for its commitment to informing a number of fundamental practical concerns that would otherwise go overlooked. In other words, it should not be necessary to dismantle moral theory wholesale to demonstrate the normative import of living authentically. Although we could painstakingly dissect each major moral theory's relationship with authenticity separately, such a move is neither necessary nor helpful in our particular circumstances. Instead, it should suffice to take them 'of a piece,' and examine what sets them apart more generally. After all, if a given moral theory comes up short, as it were, while others can fill in those same gaps, then subsequently proclaiming authenticity as the panacea to a mirage of a problem would be to caricature moral theory unfairly.

The most stark and irreconcilable contrast is two-fold: first, traditional moral theories' use of binding force to bolster their prescriptions; second, regardless of the tack that is taken, the tack applies universally without nuance—there is no fine-print opt-out clause at the bottom of the contract and we sign it compulsively at birth. In Aristotle's tradition, there is a best way for humans *qua* humans to live and this, at its core, admits of no deviance. For Kant and his successors, our rational will binds us to a predetermined set of permissible and impermissible actions and for Mill and his adherents the principle of utility is proclaimed like the 11th commandment. Though secular in nature, these three normative ethical theories share something in common with the world's major faith paths: a doctrine of normative truths that does not depend on our preference for its validity. This one-size-fits all approach to ethical decision making leads to the “mesmeric force” that G.E.M. Anscombe, among others, believes the moral *ought* to have accrued over the years.⁶⁹ If what is right and wrong, good and proper, can only be understood through one particular lens, regardless of what color that lens may be, then there is little room for the notions of desire and ground projects so vital to authenticity to flourish. As we have shown in the preceding sections, desire and ground projects are themselves preeminently important because they often furnish us with the very reasons we choose to go on living at all. While the specific content of these desires and ground projects are contingent based on our constitution and circumstances, they can still be said to occupy this role in a more general sense regardless of content. If, like Camus, purports, “There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide,”⁷⁰ then it is these considerations, rather than the universalized unwavering prescriptions of morality, that have the potential to propel us forward out of despair or apathy. Again, the distinction we have been drawing is not so much normative as it is descriptive; that is, it is not so much that desire and ground projects *ought* to motivate our lives more than an impersonal and universal morality, but rather that they *do* and this, if anything, appears to be

⁶⁹ G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 33 (1958): 8.

⁷⁰ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955) section 3.

the inescapable fact, an observation rooted in lived experience *a posteriori* as much as it is rendered plausible *a priori*. We will explore morality's insistence on its binding force (a precondition it does not share with authenticity) in more detail in the following section; but for now, it is sufficient to illustrate the issue with the paradigmatic case of the passionate, though not particularly talented, musician. Regardless of the duties and obligations imposed on him by morality (e.g. to his family, or civil society), he knows that he must go on playing music first and foremost, notwithstanding commercial success, in order to have any reason to go on at all. The question of suicide presents itself, implicitly or otherwise, and an authentic framework offers the tools by which he might begin to make heads or tails of his situation in a way that morality's standard approach, by its very nature, cannot.

Consequently, morality's insistence on impartiality commits itself to a version of *motivational externalism* (as opposed to authenticity's motivational *internalism*) that struggles to align itself with our lived experience of the world. Bernard Williams discusses this motivational issue at length, and ultimately rejects the notion that external reasons alone are sufficient motives for action. In effect, he argues that, "we cannot have genuine reasons to act that have no connection whatever with anything we care about," including morality that appeals solely to our rational faculties.⁷¹ Essentially, he observes that unless a motive for action arises from "an agent's subjective motivational set,"⁷² or a set of further motivations that reliably build on what is already extant, then we will have no reason to act because external reasons alone do not exist. While this *may* spell trouble for moral systems more generally (both Aristotle and Kant would notably respond that their ethics are bound up in further facts about human nature or an agent's rationality, respectively; i.e., by their very nature, their moral systems are derived from internal reasons—though for reasons we have yet to explore, there are serious reasons to doubt the universal binding force these prescriptions subsequently claim),

⁷¹ Sophie Grace Chappell, "Bernard Williams," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), §4.

⁷² Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 102.

authenticity as we have depicted it encounters no such difficulties. This is because *desire*, and, by extension, ground projects, are the quintessential examples of internal reasons—by their very nature, they motivate our action in the direction of that which is important to us. In doing so, authenticity provides a sturdy foundation upon which the individual can construct the remainder of an ethical life *for himself*. By intimately linking itself with our “subjective motivational set” and subsequently admitting of variance, authenticity plugs the practical gaps left in morality’s wake. Thus, if our overarching practical concern of, “How should *I* live, in a way that others might not?” contains anything we care about (which it almost assuredly does; indeed, we likely, though not unequivocally, care deeply), then authenticity has amply demonstrated its value in a way that contemporary moral theory does not. Before we go on, however, a discussion of that variance, and the binding force it repudiates, must be more fully undertaken.

3. Objections

If we cast a backwards glance, we must conclude that an authentic approach can be adequately described in terms of a few elementary but vital themes around which individuals stake out meaning for themselves and seek to let their lives serve as the unique expression of their personal understanding of what matters. Despite the intuitive appeal of this approach, coupled with the rational foundation we have erected for it in the preceding pages, the overarching way of life espoused by authenticity has never lacked its fair share of critics due to its supposed tendency to disregard morality’s binding obligations, as it were, in such a way as to negate whatever practical import that it may lay claim to. In *Against Authenticity*, Simon Feldman outlines a two of the most potent objections.⁷³ While they are certainly not the ultimate authority or final word on the subject, they denounce authenticity, directly or indirectly, in several compelling ways that deserve further attention. Feldman’s ruptures with authenticity are, again, twofold: (1) the moral objection whereby

⁷³ Feldman is a professor of philosophy at Connecticut College.

authenticity leaves space for wicked deeds to be endorsed (“It seems clear...that we can be conscientiously true to ourselves in the pursuit of what are in fact morally despicable ends.”⁷⁴); and (2) the egoism objection whereby authenticity necessitates too heavy an emphasis on the individual at the expense of others (“Thinking too much about who we really are and what we really want, even conscientiously, can lead to paralysis and narcissistic self-involvement.”⁷⁵). Let us briefly examine them both in further detail.

In what we might term ‘the objection from evil,’ Feldman states the essentials of his position: “Thinking ‘for oneself’ has no special connection with morality, especially if one’s iconoclasm involves flouting pro-social norms dictating cooperation and respect.”⁷⁶ In other words, thinking for oneself is, at best, value neutral, and we should not let historical strongmen and creative geniuses off the hook for their reprehensible behavior simply because of their high rating on the authenticity scale. When authenticity “lead[s] us to harm others in accordance with our ‘true’ and perhaps vicious or simply amoral selves” it is best to err on the side of conceding our decision making to those more noble and knowledgeable than ourselves.⁷⁷ Far from the antithesis of all that is admirable in thought, word, and deed, *inauthenticity* is actually quite estimable when it leads us away from the harmful influences of poor judgment, poor upbringing, and *hubris* (as when we choose to rely on ourselves for its own sake, despite considerable personal ignorance concerning the matter at hand.) On this account, to live in bad faith is far *less* deplorable than to live an unabashedly immoral lifestyle justified by our employment of a Nietzschean tactic by which we assert personal supremacy as a means of excusing our reprehensible behavior. Counter to authenticity’s methodology, Feldman effectively asserts that the mere fact that the laws of the universe do not physically *prevent* us from engaging in particular acts does not mean that it is *morally* permissible for us to do so. To assert that

⁷⁴ Simon Feldman, *Against Authenticity* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 14.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 15.

analogous relationship would be to make a category error regarding the word *can*, which is *not* value neutral in both cases.⁷⁸

In the second case, which we might term, ‘the objection from egoism,’ Feldman further maintains that authenticity runs counter to our collective well-being by promoting the ends of the individual at the expense of society taken as a whole. The latter objection’s appeal is even more natural than that of the first, given the way we have sketched authenticity to this point. Authenticity is necessarily self-referential, and that insistence on returning to the self as, if not the ultimate source of knowledge, at least the director of inquiry, causes understandable consternation on the part of those who believe that such a constant concern for the self comes at the expense of those who surround us. Cultural historian Christopher Lasch further solidifies authenticity’s link to narcissism, a psychological disorder characterized by a lack of empathy and self-obsessed behavior, among other things, claiming that contemporary culture “celebrates” and “justif[ies] self-absorption as ‘authenticity’ and ‘awareness.’”⁷⁹ In doing so, authenticity’s greatest strength is turned against itself as its most crippling weakness. Feldman’s egoistic criticism here is twofold: not only does authenticity advocate a brand of narcissism that is damaging to those outside the self, it also does not satisfy the requirements for promoting the well-being of the individual, rendering it a worthless ideal on all counts. The life of the narcissist, while outwardly shimmering, is often characterized by an inner bankruptcy fueled by an anxiety to present a particular image—in this case, the image of the authentic individual. The incessant preoccupation with the self and what it desires paradoxically cuts us off from genuine and full-fledged satisfaction by searching for a standard that can never be reached and sanctioning a peculiar brand of ignorance under which appeals to external authority are rejected on their origin alone, regardless of the detriment to the individual caused in the process.

⁷⁸ Or so the old axiomatic wisdom goes: “Just because you *can* do something doesn’t mean you *should*.”

⁷⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 218.

Of course, the core of the egoistic critique is embedded in the unhealthy relationship between self and other that authenticity endorses. (The cut against authenticity's ability to provide a veritable roadmap to satisfaction was always intended as little more than the nail in the coffin.) Indeed, if an integral assumption of morality's more traditional roots, one which Feldman aligns himself with, is that moral prescriptions apply universally and unfalteringly, then it follows that the fallout from adopting those prescriptions have the potential to effect anyone. Consequently, it stands to reason that if anyone is set to be impacted by universal morality, then we ought to promote something conducive to the well-being of the collective over that of the individual. In other words, there is something deeply troubling about the notion of authenticity, which seems to entail that subjective feelings and desires can override objectively rational deliberation that serves to benefit us all. Wary of the license authenticity grants individuals to forsake communal well-being in the name of all that is personal, Feldman⁸⁰ seeks to demystify this inward prosperity by exposing it as the sacred cow that it is.⁸¹ He says, "there surely seem to be some things that are more important than our own well-being—if we care about being good..., then sometimes we will inevitably have to sacrifice our own well-being and perhaps even threaten to do things that alienate us from our deepest selves."⁸² Accordingly, authenticity is recalled back to the earlier, universalist chimes of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill among countless others who essentially asserted, "The best life (full stop) cannot reliably be expected to be the best life *for us*."⁸³ In essence, authenticity works as a massive intellectual justification of egoism in which the desires of the individual are exalted simply because they come from within. Rather than comply with this amoral maneuver, this stunt's true colors need to be revealed: it is a dangerous enticement aimed at promoting antisocial behavior that ultimately disadvantages society viewed collectively. There is simply no reason to assume that the innate whims

⁸⁰ Again, Feldman is no final or comprehensive authority on the issue, but instead serves here as a chosen mouthpiece for a line of criticism against authenticity that runs in this same vein.

⁸¹ And, as Mark Twain was fond of saying, "Sacred cows make the best hamburgers."

⁸² Simon Feldman, *Against Authenticity* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 12.

⁸³ Ibid.

of certain individuals should count for more in the final calculation than the universal obligations we share to uphold the general happiness of one another. We flourish best as a species when we do right by our neighbors and future generations regardless of the immediate impact (for good or ill) that orientation has on our ability to realize our desires. Given that the undue weight that personal considerations are granted under the guise of authenticity, situating such universal concerns firmly in our blind spot, it should be removed as a possible goal of human existence both generally and in particular cases.

A. The metaethicist's dilemma

There are several ways we might hope to respond to Feldman, who has to this point furnished us with a bevy of objections that attempt to discredit authenticity from multiple angles. Given Feldman's presumptuous residency within the moral realists' framework, perhaps the most fruitful line of argumentation would be to demonstrate how Feldman's objections depend on a question-begging appeal to moral standards that lack the authority he claims for them. The objection from evil, the egoism objection, and all of the rest that flows from them help their cause by resting on an implicit assumption regarding morality that must be assessed further. While the moral realist's method has its dangers and its advantages, nothing better restores authenticity's practical potential than abandoning this pretense of binding force in favor of a more honest, though less popular skeptical foundation. With moral realism at its back, Feldman's objections become ingenious in their own way. Thus, in defense of authenticity, it is necessary to remove the presumption of guilt from that which is socially frowned upon, to own its primary appeal as evocation rather than obligation, and to reclaim metaethics for itself accordingly. Having sufficiently and willingly fielded objections in the court of moral realism, however, we must now step back and address the metaethical foundation on which they rest and the problems that attend it.

About anarchism, Noam Chomsky expressed,

Anarchism, in my view, is an expression of the idea that burden of proof is always on those who argue that authority and domination are necessary. They have to demonstrate, with powerful argument, that that conclusion is correct. If they cannot, then the institutions they defend should be considered illegitimate. How one should react to illegitimate authority depends on circumstances and conditions: there are no formulas.⁸⁴

Bertrand Russell made remarks within the same vein concerning atheism:

If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed by even our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is an intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time.⁸⁵

Both, of course, are remarking in their own way on the strange corner the philosophical burden of proof has been backed into regarding the existence of power structures—Government in Chomsky’s case and God in Russell’s. Through an analogy designed to find common ground in our rational faculties, Russell demonstrates the absurdity of asserting that the burden of proof lies with those who would dare to question the existence of a floating teapot orbiting the Sun in space—and then proceeds to carry the analogy to its logical conclusion, showing that this is exactly what Christians have done for millennia regarding God! In a much soberer fashion, Chomsky makes a comparable move, contending that governments are not legitimate by their very existence, but must be forced to provide evidence that their impact on the lives of those whom they govern is, on the whole, for better and not for worse. There is nothing inherent in the nature of God or government that lifts them above the fray, as it were, and grants them immunity from complying with this basic standard of proof. Far from being privileged by nature, political and religious power structures have managed to creep into the public consciousness and exert their stronghold through a discreetly

⁸⁴ Noam Chomsky, interview by Tom Lane, *ZNet*, December 23, 1996.

⁸⁵ Bertrand Russell, “Is There a God? [1952],” *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell, Vol. 11: Last Philosophical Testament, 1947-68*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 547-8.

constructed strategy of fear mongering and indoctrination. After all, these organizations are not so foreign, really; they were organized by men to create power and are sustained by men to maintain power. Why should we have any recourse to believe that the collective will think and behave any differently than the average of the individuals who constitute it? As a mere conglomeration of people and not their hierarchical superior, the claims of these institutions must be subjected to the same rigorous standard of proof that we subject murder suspects to if we wish to put the real meaning behind our “of the people, by the people, for the people” mantra back into society.⁸⁶ Considering the far vaster danger (and benefit) these institutions can implement, operating under a guise of default legitimacy will no longer suffice, nor has it ever.

Morality can be helpfully viewed as a corollary to these twin power structures of church and state, serving as the code of acceptable behavior by which they attempt to modify and control behavior, this being the 10 commandments (or 5 precepts, Yamas/Niyamas, etc.) and legal codes respectively, although its purview often extends culturally beyond what is explicitly recorded in these doctrines, and it is employed just as readily by atheists and anarchists as by Christians and capitalists. For our present purposes, we can consider morality not only as a corollary but a cousin to church and state. Attitudes concerning all three in the public consciousness are remarkably similar—their legitimacy and power to exercise behavior modification is often tacitly accepted out of hand instead of reasoned to by means of logical proof. Like their rogue cousins, the default position is that the system of morality exists and ought to be obeyed, leaving those who oppose the critically unexamined foundations of this system to *prove* their non-existence, which, as we know, is impossible, for as mere humans we possess neither the omnipotence nor the omnipresence required to conclusively show that morality does not and could not ever exist.

⁸⁶ From Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address,” though I presume the sentiment is admired beyond the States as well.

Given what we know about morality, we want to be careful not to overstate the analogous nature of the relationship between morality and church and state. If their similarity lies within the proclaimed ubiquitous authority, then their difference lies in the resources at their disposal to enforce that authority. Just as a given legal code applies to all of that country's citizenry regardless of whether they deem the dominant political authority to be legitimate, and just as a given religious code putatively applies to the whole world over irrespective of the faith they do or do not adhere to, so too does a given moral code presume to apply universally without regard to personal preference or desire. As with church and state, the truth of morality is deemed something to be discovered, not created. Whereas the state has recourse to jail those who break the law and God can banish nonbelievers and sinners to Hell after death for their behavior in this life (or another karmic trip around the wheel of samsara, etc.), morality in and of itself has no such powers⁸⁷—hence its historic affiliation with both of the former groups who have, often unconsciously, aided in furthering its ends where it could get no further alone.⁸⁸ Philosophically, this is a particularly salient point because morality has largely tried to detach itself from these cultural institutions and has instead preferred to operate on a primarily secular and academic basis since the Renaissance. Despite a heavy degree of infighting in the intervening years that shows no signs of letting up, morality as an institution has gained esteem from many opponents of church and state precisely *because* it tries to transcend religious and national borders to uncover that which binds us together as humans, on a corporeal rather than a supernatural or conceptual level.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Of course, one could argue that the criminal always stands the chance of evading 'justice' and the 'sinner' likewise may not be subjected to God's wrath (or additional rebirths, etc.) if he is right in thinking that He never existed at all, thereby diluting the authorities' ability to make good on their threats of punishment. While this is undoubtedly true, I do not think it dilutes *our* point: on the assumption that the authority in question can lay down a code at all, it necessarily follows that it has the power to then enforce it.

⁸⁸ Though there is not space here to cover this subject in depth, this is one of the primary arguments Nietzsche makes in the first treatise of his *Genealogy of Morals*.

⁸⁹ Several modern scholars favor a revised interpretation of *religion's* etymological origins. Stemming from the Latin *ligare*, meaning "to bind or connect," *religion* is then "that which binds us together." Thus, morality as a school of the modern philosophical tradition can be helpfully understood as a continuation of this project on more secular grounds. See: Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, with Bill Moyers, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor Books, 1991).

Historically, this binding agent has been sought for in any number of human facets that we collectively share. Plato attempted to ground morality in our ability to reason, Aristotle tried to ground it in what we can observe about human nature, and Thomas Aquinas endeavored to show that it is self-evident to anyone who might care to look. Nearly all subsequent Western moral theory flows from here. One thread is common: morality is discoverable, and by association applicable, to every human being by virtue of our being human and not for any other reason. Naturally, disputes abound over what precisely constitutes this knowledge, but this is more or less beside our point—the turn toward authenticity is in the source of the knowledge (i.e. that which lies within us as opposed to that which lies without us) rather than the content of that knowledge.

Bearing the above in mind, we must be careful not to miss the forest for the trees. Our present inquiry is not so much concerned with locating the proper source of morality's headstream, but in explicating the nature of such sources in a broader sense. Given the unwieldy nature of the justification of morality more generally, we can say that the particular features of each moral theory are irrelevant to our discussion, since we are only concerned with the nature of morality's authority in the wake of its split with law and religion. This is, of course, not a declaration that morality no longer overlaps with church and state (indeed, it often does) but alternatively a pointed assessment of a peculiar brand of *secular* morality that has attempted to distance itself from justification using these external standards.⁹⁰ Comprising nearly the whole of contemporary academic philosophy, morality as such has profited mightily from relocating its source away from the arbitrary (the laws) and the unprovable (God/the supernatural) toward something inoffensive and recognizable by all—or, at least that is the hope.

In the time since morality ceased to lean on church and state as a valid foundation, it has been an open folly to assume that the legitimacy it gained in the eyes of many skeptics has not been

⁹⁰ As evidenced by the fact that, "Because God declared it so," or, "Because it's illegal" hardly suffice as justification for a moral proposition in philosophical circles. (Chappell 2015)

counteracted with a loss of equal, if not greater magnitude. Naturally, the loss comes at the hands of the very reason why it attached to the twin traditions of power in the first place. If religion lays claim to God's omnipotence, and the state relies on our increasingly militarized police force, then aside from value neutral social norms, morality is left with a singular word with which to enforce a behavioral code that, in all its innumerable iterations, runs at least as deep and broad as church and state: *ought*. We *ought* to "act only in accordance with that maxim through which [we] can at the same time will that it become a universal law," says Kant.⁹¹ We *ought* to "act...in proportion as [our actions] tend to promote happiness," and we ought *not* to act "as [our actions] tend to produce the reverse of happiness," proclaims Mill.⁹² Regardless of how right and noble these formulations sound, the truth is that morality's self-alienation from the institutions of power transforms the structure of its authority from the three-branched system explicit in the state and implicit in the church to a two (or one, contingent on interpretation) branch system exemplified by morality—namely, the judicial.⁹³ In an apocryphal statement, Andrew Jackson purportedly said the following in response to Chief Justice John Marshall's ruling: "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it!"⁹⁴ Might we venture to say the same of morality? *The moralists have made their decision; now let them enforce it!* The only difference between the two claims, as I see it, is that America's longstanding respect for rule of law forecasted Jackson's eventual concession to Marshall, whereas morality has no such recourse to defend itself. The upshot of all this is not so much that morality has no enforcement mechanism, but rather the lack of an enforcement mechanism entails that morality's binding force is illusory. Without binding force, the moral ought is rendered meaningless (at least in

⁹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. & ed. Allen W. Wood, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 37.

⁹² John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 10.

⁹³ The three branches of government, as we all remember from grade eight civics class, consists in a legislative function that makes the laws, an executive that enforces the laws, and a judicial function that interprets the laws. Both religion (and morality, for that matter) would likely protest that they do not create the laws *ex nihilo* but uncover them instead. Although certainly interesting, the discrepancy is irrelevant for our discussion.

⁹⁴ The source material likely comes from a letter to John Coffee, in which he said, "The decision of the Supreme Court has fallen stillborn and they find that it cannot coerce Georgia to yield its mandate." See: Paul F. Boller Jr., *They Never Said It: A Book of Fake Quotes, Misquotes, and Misleading Attributions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53.

the categorical sense) since we are entitled to *opt out*, as it were, of the moral system with no mind-independent repercussions whatsoever. This conclusion, of course, applies to Feldman's criticisms as well—the normative *ought* implicitly endorsed in his critique of authenticity (i.e., 'we ought not to make authenticity a first priority') is essentially empty under the revised descriptive understanding of morality we have etched.

The idea we are presenting here is not a new one. With her seminal 1958 article, G. E. M. Anscombe is credited with reviving scholarly interest in a virtue-ethics tradition that had been largely relegated to the margins of academic discussion since at least the Middle Ages. She too endeavored to show that both consequentialist and deontological schools improperly abused the moral *ought* to their own detriment; such use had long since been rendered incoherent by the shift from supernatural to natural underpinnings. Without a higher authority from which to derive its power, she claims, morality's absolute prescriptions lose their supposed binding force and subsequently become devoid of meaning altogether. Consequently, she writes, "It would be most reasonable to drop [the moral ought.] It has no sense outside a law conception of ethics; they are not going to maintain such a conception; and you can do ethics without it, as shown by the example of Aristotle."⁹⁵ To keep the moral ought in spite of this revelation, she adds, would be akin to keeping "the notion 'criminal'...when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten."⁹⁶ Despite the powerful psychological effect that might linger around the term 'criminal' in our hypothetical scenario (or the moral *ought* in our present situation), the concept itself would not refer to anything real at all. The success or failure of Aristotle's project is not bound up with ours, for he too does not employ the moral *ought* to bolster his propositions—regardless of whether his account (or anyone else's, for that matter) of the good life is accurate, however, it can register in the minds of men as sound reasoning and advice at best, since the dismantling of the moral *ought* signals the end

⁹⁵ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 33, 24 (1958): 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

of its power to impose demands on our will based on argument or rhetoric alone. Rather than rely on antiquated measures of behavior control, moralists sympathetic to these approaches must either alter their strategy to reflect this inherent inability to enforce moral codes or revert to backing by the church to make use of the legalistic concepts of *ought* and obligation. Given Western philosophy's recent aversion to all things supernatural, the latter seems unlikely.⁹⁷

Of course, Anscombe was hardly the first to profess the notion that morality's binding force has become an illusion since it rejected the aid of a legitimate external authority to enforce it. In 1840, Schopenhauer attempted to skewer Kantian ethics by demonstrating, among other things, that its focal point, the categorical imperative, is ultimately vacuous. Like Anscombe, he charges Kant with inadvertently borrowing his moral structure from theology, and granting it powers it can no longer reasonably claim given its newfound secular foundation. Hence, Schopenhauer reassesses and ultimately rejects the moral *ought* that undergirds the categorical imperative.

Every obligation derives all sense and meaning simply and solely from its relation to threatened punishment or promised reward. Hence, long before Kant was thought of, Locke says: "For since it would be utterly in vain, to suppose a rule set to the free actions of man, without annexing to it some enforcement of good and evil to determine his will; we must, wherever we suppose a law, suppose also some reward or punishment annexed to that law." What *ought* to be done is therefore necessarily conditioned by punishment or reward; consequently, to use Kant's language, it is essentially and inevitably *hypothetical*, and never, as he maintains, *categorical*. If we think away these conditions, the conception of obligation becomes void of sense; hence *absolute obligation* is most certainly a *contradictio in adjecto*.⁹⁸

Philippa Foot arrives at a similar conclusion: if we wish to rescue moral philosophy from incoherence in light of the moral ought's fall from infallibility, then we ought to call a spade a spade and relabel categorical imperatives to reflect their true nature as mere hypothetical imperatives. By demanding strict adherence, moralists "are relying on an illusion, as if trying to give the moral *ought* a

⁹⁷ For the record, Anscombe herself was doubtful of philosophy's ability to formulate the bulletproof account of human flourishing needed for virtue ethics to see its project through. Her strong Catholic inclinations seem to support an alternative reading of MMP in which she endorses not a return to virtue ethics, but divine command theory.

⁹⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. Arthur Brodrick Bullock, (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Limited, 1903), 32-33.

magic force”⁹⁹ when it possesses no such capabilities. The reward and punishment incentives built into theocracy and government provide us with the practical *motivation* required to activate our *desire* in the direction that the *institution* in question so wishes. Without this motivational appeal, there is simply no argument they can make to the amoralist that would oblige him to obey the so-called rules created, interpreted, and enforced on its basis alone. Stripped of its binding force, morality exposes itself as just another form of ideology, hampered by a descriptive character that precludes claims to strict normativity. Far from the only game in town, a given moral system is forced to compete in the free market place of ideas and appeal to our motivational structures rather than question begging if it wishes to gain traction.

This is not to say that some moral theories (and, by extension, some ideologies) are not grounded in further facts about what we think we know about the world, particularly human nature, and some more so than others. Certainly, a correspondence to observable truth may go a long way toward attracting followers to a given cause, but the degree to which a given moral theory is able to turn skeptics into believers does not, in and of itself, furnish it with any more legitimacy than if it were able to boast only a modest following. While a large following often does inadvertently equip a moral code with some degree of legitimacy through an ability to wield social approval and disapproval mechanisms to its advantage—which is, after all, simply a more nuanced manifestation of the enforcement principle typically available to church and state—a large following neither guarantees that the movement in question will be ‘moral’ in the traditional sense (Hitler’s Nazism is an excellent example), nor does it register particularly powerfully with those residing on the moral margins. No, the specific *content* of a moral code can have no bearing on our ability to wriggle free from it given the *nature* of moral codes themselves, which is inherently to lack a control mechanism

⁹⁹ Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” *The Philosophical Review* 81, 3 (1972): 315.

suitable to enforce it. If morality is to reclaim the influence it has lost at the hands of this devastating criticism, it will assuredly come by means of voluntary service rather than forced labor.

At the onset of Prohibition, Albert Einstein remarked on his first impression of America:

The prestige of government has undoubtedly been lowered considerably by the prohibition law. For nothing is more destructive of respect for the government and the law of the land than passing laws which cannot be enforced. It is an open secret that the dangerous increase in crime in this country is closely connected to this.¹⁰⁰

Replace the government-laden terminology for its moral equivalent and we have the whole of the problem laid before us: ‘The prestige of *morality* has undoubtedly been lowered considerably by the *categorical imperatives*. For nothing is more destructive of respect for *morality* and the *moral law* of the land than passing *prescriptions* which cannot be enforced. It is an open secret that the dangerous crime in *immorality* is this *world* is closely connected to this.’ If our most recent election has revealed anything, it is that attempting to shame people into submission to politically correct culture by touting its moral superiority and the associated obligation to think and act accordingly does not work, precisely because the patronized group wised up enough to realize that morality has an opt-out clause that renders it sterile in the minds of those who will it so. Rather than piling on yet another system of morality to an already overloaded field of potentialities, we have opted to eschew this method in favor of something more relatable to our ordinary experience of moral obligation, namely that it remains nonbinding. It is precisely by avoiding the language of obligation that authenticity hopes to reclaim some of the legitimacy falsely claimed by its predecessors.¹⁰¹ The best we can aspire to do is demonstrate authenticity’s unique appeal using the limited tools we have available to us—the rest, fittingly, is left up to the reader. But the loss of moral realism’s authoritative power is felt equally across all arguments, including the objections Feldman has subjected authenticity to thus far. While the moral skepticism outlined here certainly cannot close

¹⁰⁰ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, trans. Sonya Bargmann, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1960), 6.

¹⁰¹ As we have stated, the omission of the moral *ought* in defense of authenticity throughout this paper is entirely intentional.

the door alone, it does make the case that authenticity cannot be reasoned against merely because of the ‘immorality’ it permits. Indeed, a given moral proposition’s complete ineptitude at enforcing itself coupled with the burden of proof to establish an act’s morality or immorality that rests solely with the accuser, entails that any such proof will inherently be circular. Furthermore, as I hope we have shown, without the ability to enforce its own account of right and wrong, morality and all the moral *oughts* that follow from it are altered so radically that they necessarily cannot be said to express objective truth at all. As in the case of Prohibition, if morality cannot enforce the imperatives it expounds, then why should anyone bother to listen? Where is the motivation? No, if authenticity is to be detracted from in any meaningfully significant way, another line of thought must be employed.

B. The mythic objection

The combination of the pessimists’ views on human nature, coupled with the moralists’ views on the nature of secular moral judgments, which they failed to realize would be both guillotined by the is-ought gap and their inability to enforce themselves, constituted the main objections to authenticity. Bathed in the light of the distinctions we have just highlighted, however, these criticisms become non-issues.

Still, the *moral* objections to authenticity do not comprise the whole of the issues. Even if it is true that both the objection from evil and the egoism objection can be alleviated by the further metaethics we have delineated, difficulties nevertheless remain. More specifically, we must reconcile authenticity’s insistence on self-discovery and the willful creation of the self *ex nihilo*, which seems to violate the law of conservation of energy,¹⁰² with our understanding of how we are, to a large extent, products of our environment incapable of such independent feats of will except by self-delusion. Over 2500 years ago, Gautama Buddha saw the difficulty of the ‘self,’ conditioned by innumerable, impermanent influences in the world, defining itself as separate from that world in such a way as to

¹⁰² Energy is neither created nor destroyed; rather, it is transformed from one form to another.

constitute a real, unitary and enduring self.¹⁰³ Much later, David Hume would echo those sentiments, writing that what we conceive of the self is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement.”¹⁰⁴ Though both thinkers were concerned not with authenticity, a term they predated, their philosophy has been co-opted to varying degrees by further thinkers in a number of ways that, although often contradicting one another, still strike at supposed misunderstandings of authenticity. Nietzsche preaches against self-creation in favor of self-discovery;¹⁰⁵ Foucault argues against self-discovery in favor of self-creation;¹⁰⁶ Adorno denounces the entire “liturgy of inwardness” as clever sophistry for replacing one set of ideologies with another—the ethic of authenticity becomes what it set out to deconstruct.¹⁰⁷ Although each of these criticisms is directed at a particular aspect of authenticity, and sometimes directed even more finely at a particular author’s conception of it, each is touching the same chord. Regardless of authenticity’s moral strengths and shortcomings, they contend, the notion doesn’t add up metaphysically, considering what we can surmise about the self and its relation to the world.

Put otherwise, these critics have made it necessary for us to delve deeper into the relationship between the individual and the world, between creation and imitation, to clarify the *metaphysics* of authenticity if we wish to ensure that it is more than a mirage and indeed worth pursuing. Although our prior discussion of metaethics may seem to have implied that authenticity can function as a viable option with or without a coherent metaphysical backing, this is true only insofar as secular morality cannot obligate particular modes of living by assuming the truth of those

¹⁰³ Gautama Buddha, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya*, trans. Maurice Walshe, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 226-8.

¹⁰⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 134.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo and The Antichrist*, trans. Thomas Wayne, (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 39.

¹⁰⁶ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983), 237.

¹⁰⁷ Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski & Frederic Will, (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973), 70. Adorno’s criticisms are leveled primarily at Heidegger’s attempt to systematize authenticity, but this polemic’s general appeal is not without warrant.

morals from the outset. It is not our intention, nor does it seem particularly tempting, to pursue a course of action that has no correspondence with literal fact regardless of our ability to do so, any more than it seems desirous to chase that desert mirage when we already know it to contain no water. To do so would be to ask more of our collective faculties, rational and otherwise, than is necessary or possible given our explicit goal of remaining *practical* above all else. Thus, our effort of reconciliation will be to explore and contextualize the relationship between two opposing poles of self-as-illusion and self-as-end-in-itself to discover, if we can, that the dichotomy we have set up here is a false one. In some certain meaningful sense, to contextualize is to make practical, and to explore is to envision ways that seemingly disparate ideas can coalesce creatively rather than fancifully. As we originally conceived of it, authenticity, under the guidance of desires and ground projects, in response to a social world which often makes demands on the individual that cannot be accommodated without giving up our entire motivation for living in the first place, has arrived at the point at which it must either come to terms with a view, not to be taken lightly, that holds the individual to be an inseparable feature of her environment rather than distinct from it. Understood as an aspect of this unified whole, to speak of the raw material, so to speak, that the individual uses to construct an authentic response to a lived situation as originating solely or even primarily from within the self begins to reek of absurdity. Only by articulating a coherent relationship with community can authenticity earn its final endorsement.

Obviously, here is not the place to barrel headlong into a meticulous discussion of the nature of the self, but we may graze the surface by drawing two categorical distinctions on which it turns: *permanence* and *separateness*. In the traditional sense that both the Buddha and Hume rail against, these are the two characteristics that make up the object of their disbelief: the idea of a self that is both permanent (i.e. essential and enduring) and separate (i.e. distinct from both its environment and other beings) is an illusion. From these two characteristics, we can deduce a third derivative, namely

that of *possessiveness*—having established ourselves as distinct from others and permanent, we typically envision ourselves as *owning* that unchanging essence and all the particulars that manifest as myriad expressions of it in ways that others cannot. Presenting the Buddha’s and Hume’s counterarguments to the more conventional understanding of self outlined above is not necessary for our task at hand, because our response intends to go *through* their conceptions, not around them. Furthermore, their subsequent refutation will be equally unnecessary given our intention to demonstrate authenticity’s flexibility to operate within either schema. In other words, if the reductionists are mistaken, then the traditional notion of self stands and can provide a sturdy foundation on which to ground the possibility of authenticity. On the contrary, if their perceptions are correct, then our hope is to explore ways in which authenticity can thrive given a worldview where these further facts hold true and bear some significance on our lives. *Prima facie*, it appears that all three characteristics are necessary prerequisites for a meaningful conception of authenticity to take form. Put negatively, if the self is impermanent, then there can be no fixed subject for the authentic individual to turn inward toward as a source of self-knowledge upon which authentic responses can bloom. If the self is fluid with the world (i.e. can be understood only as an aspect of the world with no possibility of a distinct existence) then the individual may not be able to offer anything more than superficially personal, since the subjectivity it sprang from is merely a myth. And if the self belongs to the world, then it cannot own the desires which bear fruit in the form of the thoughts and actions that supposedly constitute the authentic individual. Without some degree of separateness by which the authentic individual can manifest something essential within himself, the quest for authenticity seems rather like setting out on the road for Valhalla. Of course, these three aspects of the self as they relate to authenticity are more closely intertwined than this categorization entails; so in the interest of covering all of our bases, we will consider them each in turn.

Fortunately, this was the task, at least in an off-center and limited capacity, of Foucault in reaction to his concerns about the lack of a fixed, underlying substance from which we are to glean self-knowledge to translate into authentic action. Given that our environment and the influences it exerts on everything from our desires to our breakfast food is entirely *contingent*, Foucault argues, there remains nothing for us to *discover* and everything to *create*, beginning now. He writes, “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”¹⁰⁸ The presence of something permanent that we can rely on as an ultimate subjective reference point is not necessary because the authentic individual must create himself moment-to-moment as circumstances evolve and take on new forms. Although this conception puts us at odds with Nietzsche’s *amor fati*¹⁰⁹ and Kierkegaard’s idea for which we can live and die, and even with Sartre’s insistence on returning to that which is truly us, I think it accords with the conception of authenticity we have been advocating to this point, espoused explicitly by H. S. T. Just as the painter does not need to have a fixed image in mind before putting brush to canvas, so too does the authentic artist make things up on the fly, as it were, noting shifts in internal experience as they arise, adjusting accordingly. Oriented as the artist, we can attend to the practical reality of our lived experience in which a fixed self is often not presented to us with rigorous clarity. Rather than turning our backs on ourselves, so to say, the authentic individual can take this uncertainty in stride by exercising full creative license to transmute it into something intentionally personal. Viewed thusly, the non-existence of the permanent underlying self poses no threat to the

¹⁰⁸ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983), 237.

¹⁰⁹ To be fair, Nietzsche’s own perspective is rather muddled. Although his remarks on fate in *Ecce Homo* seem to imply he endorses more of the discovery model, his remarks in §270 of *The Gay Science* seem to echo Foucault: “One thing is needful—to give style to one’s character...through long practice and daily work at it.” Most persuasively, his thought contains elements of both: the lover of fate must be able to creatively respond to and affirm the myriad facts and situations of his life, and yet also perceive these same situations as externally gifted. In any case, he can be viewed as both a proponent and an opponent of the sort of orientation Foucault is proposing—his work cannot be definitively couched at either pole.

possibility of authenticity because accordance with the pop-psychology notion of ‘being true to yourself’ is not necessary for living authentically.

It is at this point, however, that Foucault’s work on the matter comes to an end and problems remain to be fully resolved. Namely, even if we do view ourselves as creators and sidestep the permanence issue, the separateness issue and the possessiveness issue still follow close behind, walking hand in hand. For the question remains: How can the authentic individual lay claim to his thoughts and actions if the distinction made between self and other or self and environment is just a social construct precipitated by a need to make sense of the world and the vantage point it is observed from? Along these lines, Daniel Dennett likens the self to a center of gravity—a “theorist’s fiction” that exists only as a concept in the abstract, with no material substance to point to.¹¹⁰ We have already dispelled the need for that substance to be permanent, but what of its existence altogether? If the co-called self is not distinct from the so-called environment, then it will be as Dennett claims: an illusion we take advantage of in order to situate ourselves within a larger context, but ultimately empty. Under this conception, for instance, a desire to become a world class soccer star was born from parents who signed the child up for youth league when he was too young to choose or understand what he was getting into, much less how it would affect his career aspirations for decades to come. The young girl who wishes to become a concert pianist was graced by her father playing the grand piano in the house every evening, and subsequently took up the instrument herself, fancying it after her father. Foucault, in an interview toward the end of his life, remarked on his career as a philosopher:

I wasn't always smart, I was actually very stupid in school ... [I]here was a boy who was very attractive who was even stupider than I was. And in order to ingratiate myself with this boy who was very beautiful, I began to do his homework for him—and that's how I became smart, I had to do all this work to just

¹¹⁰ Daniel Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. F. Kessel, P. Cole, D. Johnson (Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1992).

keep ahead of him a little bit, in order to help him. In a sense, all the rest of my life I've been trying to do intellectual things that would attract beautiful boys.¹¹¹

In essence, the classic ‘the chicken or the egg’ dilemma reveals itself here. What came first: the authentic desire to become an intellectual, or the contingent, unchosen experience of wanting to impress a young boy? While Foucault clearly professes the latter, I think he would follow that question up with another: Does it matter? Perhaps many of our most intimate desires ultimately sprang from things we have had no say in. Perhaps the ground projects we subsequently articulate belong to our environment more than they belong to ourselves because we cannot trace their causal origins back to the consciously articulated seat of self. Perhaps the most treasured aspects of our personality and the values we espouse are in fact more representative of the world we find ourselves situated in than the person we profess to be. And so on until we arrive at a discussion of moral luck.¹¹² If all that we are is determined by external circumstance and constitution, how can the possibility of authenticity ever emerge?

Although a Sartrean conception of authenticity may have difficulty responding to the difficulties expressed above, I think, rather fittingly, that they can be sufficiently addressed using the conception of authenticity we have espoused to this point in this paper. Specifically, I would like to refer to our discussion of *creation* and *interpretation*.¹¹³ The burden of creating both our choices and our responses to them in a world where comprehensive input regarding the content of those projects is impossible can be negated by redefining our role to encompass only the translation and organization of signals into meaningful bits of information. What this definition loses in sex appeal, it makes up for in practical applicability.¹¹⁴ Given that our interpretive ability is only as precise as our definition of what is meaningful (i.e. what we value) and the degree to which we are aware of

¹¹¹ James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1993), 56.

¹¹² See: Thomas Nagel, *Moral Luck*, <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1100/Nagel1.pdf>, 2

¹¹³ See page 37.

¹¹⁴ As J. R. R. Tolkien said, “All that is gold does not glitter.”

our assumptions, we have kept what is essential to maintaining a working understanding of authenticity while reframing the more troubling aspects. Thus, willful self-creation is neither necessary nor useful in the pursuit of authenticity—all we have to do is to consciously decide what to do with the experiences that have been granted to us in this moment. Given that we are, to a certain degree, necessarily molded by environmental pressures, the goal is not so much to free ourselves from their influence as it is to become aware of their presence, so that we might choose how to proceed accordingly. Notably, this requires no sense of an enduring, separate self that is uniquely mine in order to prove meaningful. Our most deep seated desires, our values, our ground projects all stem from a set of contingent facts about our existence that are not devastating in our quest to live more fully authentically because they suffice as they are when attempting to make sense of our lives within a larger framework. The constant self-awareness implicit in such an approach offers us the best defense to ensuring that our self-interpretations do not become an unwitting exercise in socially constructed ideology. Sartre's liking for jazz provides an excellent example that colors the idea we have been describing: in and of itself, the art form achieves no privileged status at unlocking authentic modes of being. Moreover, to the extent that jazz is unconsciously valued for its implicit endorsement of counter-culture, its pursuit is resolutely *inauthentic*. Only through a conscious, genuine articulation of its value and that value's origins can the individual hope for it to germinate into authentic self-expression—such articulation is available to anyone, regardless of the conception of self.

Let us return to the example of Foucault for a moment. In many ways, his life as a public intellectual was a ground project shaped by a deeper desire to attract beauty, informed by the meaning and value he bestowed on that desire. Irrespective of the source material (i.e. contingent circumstances) that effected his eventual development, the extent that he was able to articulate his actions and motives is a clear indication that his life, at least at the moment of the interview, was

lived authentically. Ground projects need not express that which is essential to the core of our being and desires need not be created *ex nihilo* to be meaningful. Foucault's authenticity lies in his self-awareness regarding his desires and his conscious decision to select *how* those desires mattered and manifested on a practical level. He recognized the source of his thoughts and behaviors and understood that living an inauthentic past does not preclude the possibility of an authentic future, nor does an authentic present guarantee the existence of an authentic future. This is an experience of constant becoming, and the authentic person who thinks himself to have attained it permanently must beware to ensure that his authentic responses do not backslide into devious manifestations of ideology.

On the off chance that our first point has gotten lost in the sauce, let us remember that we were defending neither the existence nor the non-existence of the self. Our intention was instead to show that authenticity, properly perceived, is possible within either framework, a conclusion that does not always seem as obvious given some of the more traditional conceptions of it, but which we hope passes muster following our explication, as it amounts to this. As Sartre was fond of saying, "Man is condemned to be free."¹¹⁵ In much the same way, we are condemned to live our lives, to have immense concern for our desires and ground projects, and feel pressure from without attempting to thwart our efforts to realize them. Inasmuch as authenticity offers a practical foundation for responding to these phenomena, its value remains germane. That said, if our treatment of these issues is neither sufficient nor appealing, then I invite the reader to skip to the concluding remarks. If, however, our work thus far has proven both convincing and evocative, read on for a rough and ready guide to authentic living. I hope the following will prove beneficial to those who wish to revolutionize their daily lives not through an ideologically imposed sense of duty

¹¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, trans. Philip Mairet, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian, 1957).

with its attendant guilt, self-sacrifice, and self-deadening *oughts*, but through a genuine return to the desires of the individual and the actions that flow from them.

IV. A User's Manual

Somewhere down the line, many of us arrive at the unfortunate conclusion that it is impossible to realize our life's desires. Armed with this realization, we redirect our efforts from fighting for *ourselves* to fighting for some external cause or ideal instead. These pursuits *appear* noble on the surface, but pulling back their thin veil reveals a people that have accepted alienation from their desires as their *modus vivendi*. All decisions, conscious or otherwise, to subjugate personal desires to the edicts of these inauthentic causes and ideals are necessarily reactionary rather than revolutionary because they initially arose through an act of resistance. Nevertheless, one of the most well kept secrets of our lackluster, though potentially splendid lives is that daily living can be rapturous. Despite the suffocating forces of politics, religion, and culture that press from all sides, the world is ripe with instances of people who *do* learn how to live authentically. Naturally, we jumpstart this process internally by reclaiming our own minds via consciously and critically *thinking* for ourselves rather than mindlessly absorbing the predigested opinions of others.

This section, then, is a user's manual for those who wish to live authentically, the blueprints for the synthesis of a consciously assembled core of thought for our personal, rather than ideological, use. This core of thought will be an invaluable companion in our efforts to understand why our life is the way it is and how to navigate it. Above all, this thought (i.e. our *theory*) will be developed alongside and give rise to conscious action (i.e. our *practice*). Without this vital link, which so much contemporary moral theory has tragically abandoned, our ethics is worthless—a caged beast at best, a lifeless corpse at worst. The world of ideas divorced from deeds will keep latent desires trapped in purgatory until the two reunite. Molding our own practical-theory, which is to say living authentically, is a necessary co-requisite to realizing our desires. Therefore, forging and living out our practical-theory is synonymous with a rapturous existence. The process is simultaneously destructive and creative—destructive in the sense that we must decolonize our minds from

unconsciously adopted ideologies to make room for our practical-theory; creative in the sense that we must reinhabit that space with our newly minted practical-theory from which authenticity will bloom. Centered on what we want from life, the journey to attain the fulfillment of these desires is an adventure in and of itself, and our practical-theory is the authentic means by which we travel—humorous enough to keep our spirits high in the face of adversity, evocative enough to sustain our interest in the face of the longest trip we will ever take.

Before we press on, some words on the nature of the beast are in order. An ideology is hereby understood as any system of ideas that, at its core, boils down to an abstraction, which comes packaged with an associated set of duties. Though seemingly innocuous, the ideology inverts our orientation by directing it away from ourselves, often unconsciously. Consequently, those who adhere to a given ideology are twisted to behave as *objects* rather than *subjects*, their will repurposed for service of the ideology's ends rather than their own. Though the abstraction at the core of each ideology is different, structurally they are all the same: a power-hungry group seeks to consolidate even more power to itself by drawing on the seemingly limitless supply of herd animals it can invite into its fold. Yearning for a purpose like everybody else, and yet unable to provide it for themselves, members of the herd sacrifice their autonomy, submit their will, and suffer accordingly for the illusory rewards these extended family organizations proffer. Perhaps the world's oldest and most obvious example, religion operates by exchanging undying affection for the promise of eternal life. The Abrahamic God in particular is projected as the universe's ultimate subject, under which every human being is His object to manipulate at will. Under the guise of capitalism, the same ideological structure organizes itself: Profit is the ultimate subject of world, guiding human activity by means of the invisible hand. In a deliberate move, the overt mysticism of Christianity was replaced by the secular and scientific, though no less devotional, worship of technology and consumerism. On the other side of the world, the same structure is recycled and dubbed communism—the State becomes

the ultimate subject who promises to lead the object, the proletariat, to the Promised Land on a different road. The recent rise of New Age movements suggests that we may be reverting to a modified version of the religious ideologies of old. Offering an antinode to the inward emptiness that results from excessive worship of the Consumer God, the woo-woo mysticism of these subtle ideologies functions like an escapist drug trip to simultaneously salvage our mental health while repressing revolutionary impulses.

In essence, ideology is authentic practical-theory flipped on its head: subject and object are inverted, abstractions take on the human characteristics of desire and will while human beings take on the instrumental characteristics of tools designed to service the abstraction's ends. While the particular sacrifices demanded and the specific rewards offered differ, the same basic structure is maintained through each subsequent iteration of the ultimate subject (e.g. God, Profit, the State, etc.). In the interest of further cementing the ideology's power, the daily lives and desires of individuals are separated further and further from the rudderless world they live in until the two scarcely recognize one another. Sufficiently separated from our own subjectivity, ideologies then demand our allegiance in the form of various duties and sacrifices designed to protect those in power at the expense of the individual, and if the preceding separation is divisive enough, we barely notice it. Our subservience and docility is cloaked in noble causes and ideals that nevertheless redirect our personal will toward desires that sustain the dominant ideology's authority: 'the common good,' 'national security,' 'the war effort,' 'free speech'—the list goes on and the relationship stays the same. Ideology masquerades as direct route to our desires, but in truth only offers us a vicarious relationship with the world.

We strip ideology of its squatter's rights by constantly inquiring within ourselves: How do I feel right now? How is my life going? What do I want? Am I getting what I want? If not, why not, and how can I? On the surface, this is a deceptively simple practice, yet it is one that is easily

neglected. Our lives are happening in every moment, each moment as significant as the next, and without a consciousness of our life in daily routine, we will never be able to revolutionize it. Those who haven't turned inward in some time may be surprised to find just how much information we are disclosing to ourselves all the time if we choose to become receptive to it. Each day that we deepen this practice, we reorient ourselves as the subject of our lives, and ideology slowly loosens its stranglehold on our desires as we continually expose it for what it is.

So, the construction of practical-theory is based on being fully aware of your desires and their legitimacy, and using that awareness to begin thinking for yourself and acting autonomously. The New Agers and their merry band of therapy mongers, diversity awareness trainers, and politically correct leftists speak of 'consciousness raising,' but what they really have in mind is a furthering of the systems that be by subduing perpetrators with guilt inducing, ideological narcotics. True consciousness raising only occurs authentically, by encouraging people to identify with their desires rather than imposed morality. Only through this type of awareness, free of normalized guilt, can a radical subjectivity ripe for transforming our worlds come into being.

As Nietzsche knew, the halfway point on the road from self-negation to self-affirmation is nihilism—no travelers are exempt. We enter through the lucid recognition that our daily existence contains no real *living* and begin to register the distinction between living and surviving. Standing motionless at the halfway mark, we invert the poles: subject and object are restored to their proper place, ideology is rejected in favor of desires and an overwhelming will to *be*—nothing else is true. The upside-down pyramid in which corporations say, "I love you," and their products want to befriend you are no longer glossed over as another everyday spectacle. Common 'wisdom' (e.g. "Life's not fair," "You can't always get what you want," "You win some, you lose some") is revealed for the sedative that it is, the Eucharist of the secular religion of Just Getting By. These clichés, which are collectively dubbed 'common sense' are seen as the pernicious rhetoric of self-alienation.

Slowly, we begin to realize that we have been fooled (or were fooling ourselves) into trading in the possibility of an authentic life for ourselves in return for the security that accompanies its representation.

Consequently, many nihilists feel the urge to destroy the system which has been destroying them. The simulacrum of the old world no longer delivers in the way that it used to, so they must devise a practical-theory to reorient themselves in light of what they now know. Unfortunately for many nihilists, however, this practical-theory never congeals as self-alienation gives way to social alienation. Alive but lonely, they lash out blindly grope about for an anti-social role they believe will compensate them for the time and sanity they feel cheated out of, though a role nonetheless (e.g. the suicidal, the vandal, the vigilante, the nightwalker, the mental hospital regular). Their collective failing, of course, is the failure to realize that there are others who can empathize. By finding other nihilists to work with, the solitary rage of the individual can be positively channeled via participation in a collective project of self-actualization.

This symbiotic project of transforming self and society in tandem was originally deemed *politics*, though our current political spectacle bears little resemblance to this model. The sheer possibility that an individual can either be interested or not interested in politics, the same way we may or may not be interested in basketball, bird watching, or beat boxing shows just how distanced we have become from a process that was designed to feel very intimate. Representatives, lobbyists, and think tanks further this divide and convince us that any effort to change the structure of the system is futile, so few bother to try (which only fortifies the system further). Rather than help individuals understand how and why this system contributes to their alienation, present therapeutic tactics are designed to ‘help’ the individual maintain sanity and productivity amidst a sea of banality and restrictive social roles. Effectively treating role playing as the symptom rather than the cause of alienation, the practice of pretending, concealing, and repressing our desires is offered as treatment.

Conversely, *authentic* therapy endorses changing our lives rather than adjusting to the role. The necessary link between self-therapy and collective-therapy is emphasized and politics reclaims its status as the vehicle through which we work on society by working on ourselves. Once a critical mass of individuals consciously chooses to disassociate from their roles and communicate authentically, society follows suit.

To live authentically is to make our lives—how they are and how we would like them to be—the center of our awareness. This refocusing is achieved not only by noting our own center, but by noting where it is being pressed on from the outside by means of false issues, false dichotomies, and false identities. Given that these are the most insidious types of external pressure that preclude us from living authentically, we will take a moment to examine each of them.

The media is really to blame for the mass distraction endemic to our society. A worthwhile analysis and understanding of the nature of systems and how they operate is all but drowned out by the most trivial of cultural details, supporting our troops, casual drug use, and sex scandals all included. We are encouraged to become so *opinionated* on every trifling issue that our opinion on the only issue that matters for us becomes lost in the sauce: *How we live*. Philosophy itself can be a particularly egregious combatant here, though the public's watered down version fares no better, as evidenced by the lone conversational question that asserts itself again and again: "What's your philosophy of life?" As if the necessarily abstract answer could ever get to the heart of the matter! Our philosophy of life can be deduced through our actions alone, and no amount of pontificating to the contrary can diminish the significance of what we are doing *right now*.

Hunter S. Thompson has a line in his letter on the meaning of life: "Let's assume that you think you have a choice of eight paths to follow (all predefined of course). And let's assume that you can't see any real purpose in any of the eight. *Then*—and here is the essence of all I've said—you *must find a ninth path*." In essence, he is emboldening us to reject the false dichotomies heaped on us

by social structures. We can see these everywhere: economic prosperity versus a healthy ecosystem, capitalism versus socialism, democrat versus republican. By forcing us to pick sides and tacitly accept the choices authorities present us as the only ones available, they divide, conquer, and preserve their power. Again, only by rejecting the choices we are given and reclaiming our power to choose our own choices can we manifest the creativity necessary to realize our desires, which, upon closer inspection, rarely fit into these ready-made categories.

False identities divide us in even subtler and more insidious ways. Lacking an immediate and meaningful community, people feel forced to make one up for themselves by associating with a messy host of illusory social identities—these are closely linked to social roles and are often precipitated by the state, religious, and cultural ideologies in a vicious power cycle. They are often so multiplicitous that it is easy to image a person who simultaneously identifies as an American, a Baptist, a Southerner, a patriot, a homosexual, and a Cowboys fan, the conglomeration of which makes up the self. Of course, some of these are more potent identifications than others, but at bottom they all service the same conditioned desire to belong and have the side effect of masking the more bedrock characteristics of our place in society. And this is to say nothing of the fact that a closer look at something as simple as driving to work every morning negates the significance of many of these roles. During our commute, we intrinsically link ourselves with the untold millions of people who extracted and forged the aluminum and steel used to make the car, the workers on the assembly line, and the crash-test safety drivers who determine if the vehicle is roadworthy, as well as the people in the fossil fuel and electrical industry who powered the plant the car was manufactured at. Add the people who transported the car to a dealership, the salesperson who sold the car, and the records keepers who recorded the transaction, and finally, the people who provided the sustenance for all those workers to survive while they brought the car to you—and we haven't even mentioned the infrastructure construction itself! This exercise could be extended, without dilution, to include

the entirety of the world's population. They create our lives, and we create theirs. How can social identities maintain their rigidity in the face of this pervasive interconnectedness? If anything, the real social identity that emerges in light of all these relations is that of the struggler fighting to reclaim her own life for herself. The prerequisite for reclaiming our lives, as we have been pointing at, is the rejection of all the false issues, dichotomies, and identities and placing ourselves at the center of the empty space left in their wake. From there, we can expand outward without being caught in the daze of these hindrances.

Having dismissed these external false idols, we must be careful not to construct internal false idols of our own by avoiding the twin pillars of *cynicism* and *absolutism*. As black-and-white as it gets, absolutism is the comprehensive and outright acceptance *or* rejection of particular ideologies. In a sense, the absolutist sets up a false dichotomy of their own by insisting that total rejection or total acceptance are the only choices available. Wandering through the life in search of an ideal, the absolutist, upon seeing that which resembles his ideal, proceeds to buy it hook, line, and sinker without a second thought. But the ideological market is only fit for looting—practically speaking, it is much wiser for us to move through the stalls, take what looks authentic and useful, and discard the rest. The cynic, on the other hand, rejects everything out of hand, though along similar lines as the absolutist. He has simply given up on finding his ideal and subsequently takes this strategy of complete denial to its ultimate conclusion by refusing to acknowledge that we can accept part and parcel without reverting to buying wholesale.

Living authentically, we understand that we can repurpose anything so long as we are conscious of where it came from and how we intend to use it, including ideologies. If we have the self-awareness and know-how, there is nothing inherently evil about ideology—we just need to re-envision our relationship with it and diversify our portfolio. One of the primary problems with haphazardly and uncritically drawing on a large range of ideological source material is that

contradictions are bound to crop up, and these contradictions will frustrate our desires from the inside even further. In the process of formulating our own practical-theory, we will have to dissolve whatever contradictions arise between new and old thought, perception, action, as well as continuing to add, subtract, and tweak our current worldview to incorporate new information as we receive it. This makes for a dynamic activity in which a way of life has opportunity to emerge as a synergistic compound of its constituent parts.

As we have alluded to resistance to the authentic construction of our own practical theory will be felt from groups across the ideological spectrum, including those superficially opposed to one another. Politicians, clergy, New Age gurus, law enforcement officials, teachers, corporations, social justice warriors, feminists, misogynists, white supremacists, landlords, capitalists, and socialists—anyone who has a stake in alienating us from our desires to further their own power trip sustained by domination in any of its forms will take issue with our project through whatever avenue suits them best. Given that they have something to lose by individuals taking back their own lives, they will undoubtedly fight against this, but the only way out for us is through. If we cannot reevaluate the totality of daily existence through the lens of our desires, then we will continue to find ourselves caught in quicksand.

As we near the end, a word of caution: as we mentioned toward the beginning, mere recognition of these systems of power and oppression and the ways in which they operate is not enough to free us from their prisons and realign ourselves with our desires. Though the collective sedation of several billion people only makes our projects all the more difficult, we must remember that practical-theory is not enough unless it translates into observable *action*. Practice without theory is ineffective but theory without practice is inert—the two must be conjoined if we are to eradicate our self-alienation from our desires, live authentically, and transform society in our likeness through example. Without practice, we run the risk of our theory unintentionally sedating *ourselves*, employed

as a defense mechanism so that we might not have to face that we are further from our desires than our technical know-how seems to dictate. On the other end of the spectrum, without theory we *will* unconsciously adopt someone else's, from the social justice warrior to the gangbanger. In other words, our practical theory is a means to an end, not an end in itself. If we want to act authentically and effectively toward the gratification of our desires, then we must think authentically and effectively. Only those who assemble a theory of why the world is upside down will be able to turn it right side up. A spontaneous, solitary revolution may suffice momentarily, but without the requisite theory in place beforehand, these actions will see their fruits co-opted and twisted to the betterment of ends that are not their own before they realize what has happened. If authentic self-revolution is what we seek, we will have to consciously and consistently dissolve the unconscious ideologies of old and act on our new understanding in a coherent way. If this revolution is to balloon to the collective level, then we must somehow arrive at a critical mass of individuals thinking, acting, and living authentically.

V. Conclusion

We have secured the potential solution of three problems: the what, the so what, and the now what. Like a set of Russian dolls, the first is of vast extent, touching upon the relationship of authenticity and inauthenticity; the second (provided we accept the nature of the relationship thus described) explains why we should care about the relationship just sketched; the third inscribes itself within the interior of the first two by describing what we should do with the resultant interpretation (provided we see its value). Each part of the solution rests on information gleaned from the preceding level of analysis and ultimately revolves around the role of authenticity in the evolution of a life more meaningful and satisfying than we might otherwise achieve through the lens of primarily external theory. Though the material covered was too vast for there to be any hope of providing a definitive answer, we have nevertheless considered both the evolution of authenticity to its present form, the steps it must take to defend itself from naysayers, and the possible outcome of an authentic life within the context of modern society in the hope that we might shed light on one. This simple structure has supplied us with a few conclusions.

From Kierkegaard to Nietzsche to Heidegger to Sartre to Camus and beyond, authenticity collects its subject matter, and from our individual personas it takes its form. It has maintained the profound supremacy and unparalleled truth of subjectivity, dealing with all of the difficulties that come alongside the objections raised. And while authenticity certainly did not condone the disconcerting way in which the dissidents posed their problems, it managed to embrace them under a skeptical outlook without resorting to pointing a preaching finger at those who preach without a whiff of irony. This much at least remains for certain, but many other difficulties remain with the oft contradictory conceptions of authenticity championed by its most unabashed proponents. For example, the role Heidegger played in the constitution of a universal ontology of authenticity, or the contribution of Kierkegaard's authenticity to the support of religious dogma, or the multiple

additional influences we have eliminated: Sartre's radical freedom, Nietzsche's *amor fati*, the primacy of Bernard Williams' ground projects. Without a common understanding of authenticity, we would find it impossible to meet the challenges posed by the objections to authenticity in a coherent and convincing manner. This much is obvious. Our resultant synthesis, emphasizing the main themes of authenticity within our inherently subjective center of inquiry, cover the distance needed to dispel authenticity's most recurring problems.

This much we hope is obvious, but let us review the evidence. We exposed the assumption that authenticity tends toward egoistic self-indulgent thought and action for the caricature that it is, revealing that authenticity often endorses an active engagement with the social world in order to orient itself and construct meaning. We spoke briefly of the wrongs which authenticity seems to, if not condone, at least turn a blind eye to before critically examining the *de facto* structure it purports to rest on. The underlying circular logic of these objections, founded on a moral system that has not been justified had to be delved into before proceeding further. Given that authenticity is not the object of a moral doctrine, we looked more closely at the overreaching powers typically granted to the moral *ought*. On the contrary, we argued that we must operate according to the knowledge disclosed to us by inner subjectivity, which remains unbound by the spellbinding rhetoric of a decadent morality. And finally, we explored the historical conception of the nature of the self and subsequently offered a conception of morality that retains its sense regardless of the internal metaphysics presupposed.

All objections aside, is it possible finally, at the end of this study, to determine the objective appeal and efficacy of an authentic life? Does such a concept even exist? The question remains unresolved. In fact, it is a particular paradox of the human spirit to accept the theoretical premises and still not be able to embrace their practical synthesis, an ethical paradox in which one can acknowledge the knowledge contained within the facts presented, and yet still find them insufficient

to move us to action. Sufficient in theory, but yet incomplete in practice, this paradox is rooted in the irrational aspects of human psychology and our conception of self in which a perception of the constituent parts fails to render their profound unity accessible in lived experience. In that regard, our user's manual cannot deliver us from our anxiety, and restoring the incomparable novelty of authenticity through words alone seems an impossible task. Though we can appeal to our malleable inner landscape through the evocative language of authenticity, we still feel no less that so long as authenticity is demonstrated through thought foreign to our own, we will fail to recognize it as anything more than a brief respite of inspiration at best and empty words at worst. If the true impact of authenticity is to resonate with us on the level we can only allude to in these pages, the real work must start with the reader in lived experience on no uncertain terms.

And if we reflect on the major themes of authenticity (subjectivity, desire, ground projects, self-awareness, presence) we recognize that what counts here is the substitution of man *qua* man with *ourselves*. The difference that we ascertain in the cases we apply it to show that Kant, stowed away in Königsberg outlining his doctrine of duty, and the young man, endeavoring to carefully examine his life on his own terms, are, in truth, closer than they realize given that the only possible vantage point for us is a subjective one. Moreover, if we, concurring with Nietzsche, accept that universal moral theories we discussed at the heart of this work—consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics—are simply the manifestations of particular, albeit incredibly filled out, perspectives, we must agree that the authentic individual possesses the capabilities needed to catalyze an ethical renaissance in comparison with dogmatism in all its forms. “Truth,” said Krishnamurti, “is a pathless land.”¹¹⁶ The whole authentic effort opposes itself to the unconscious acceptance of authoritative morality. The authentic individual thereby defines *himself* and, by extension, the world he would like

¹¹⁶ Jiddu Krishnamurti, “The Core of the Teachings,” *J. Krishnamurti Online*, October 21, 1980, <http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/the-core-of-the-teachings.php>. The rest of the passage reads: “Man cannot come to it through any organization, through any creed, through any dogma, priest, or ritual, not through any philosophical knowledge or psychological technique. He has to find it through the mirror of relationship, through the understanding of the contents of his own mind, through observation and not through intellectual analysis or introspective dissection.”

to see. Christopher Lasch, in his article, “The Narcissist Society,” speaks of authenticity as a “cult of expanded consciousness, health, and personal ‘growth’...to live for the moment [and]—to live for yourself.”¹¹⁷ In some sense this is true, but not in the way the author would like.

Be that as it may, by the death of Kant, the seed of authenticity was planted in the fertile soil of philosophy. It has now sufficiently grown to resist the barrage of criticism that every revolutionary idea is subjected to in turn. For some, it remains an unassailable hope and effective shield against the self-negating dissatisfaction infected by morality’s imposing shadow. The authentic life thereby achieves its practical potential.

¹¹⁷ Christopher Lasch, “The Narcissistic Society,” *The New York Review of Books*, September 30, 1976, §1.

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