

The Unbearable Lightness of Being: Authenticity and the Search for the Real

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In this article I review some of the ways in which the themes of authenticity, spontaneity and improvisation have become important values in the writing of many contemporary psychoanalysts. I examine the emergence of this trend in the context of historical and cultural changes in the construction of the self, and the fragmentation of traditional beliefs and social structures linking the individual to the collective. I also explore the relationship between the principle of authenticity and various dimensions including autonomy, mutuality, intersubjectivity, and the ethical realm. In addition I explore the perceived tensions between traditional social forms and the experience of authenticity, and examine the implications of the questions raised in this essay for our conception of the nature of psychoanalytic practice.

Keywords: authenticity, spontaneity, improvisation, intersubjectivity, true self

Milan Kundera begins his novel *Immortality* with a description of a gesture made by a woman he is observing at a swimming pool (Kundera, 1999). This woman, who we will come to know as Agnes, smiles and waves at the lifeguard who has just been giving her swimming instructions. There is something charming and elegant for Kundera in this hand wave that reminds him of the gesture of a young woman “playfully tossing a bright colored ball to her lover.” This unique gesture reveals to Kundera the essence of Agnes’ charm, and he is dazzled and strangely moved by it. Later in the novel we discover that this gesture is not as unique as it initially seems. It turns out that as a teenager, Agnes once observed a woman, whom she suspected of having an affair with her father, raising her arm to wave goodbye to him. At the time, this gesture, which had evoked “vague and immense longing” in Agnes, became unconsciously imprinted in her memory. Shortly afterward we find Agnes spontaneously using the same gesture herself, and it subsequently becomes part of her repertoire. One day Agnes notices her younger sister using exactly the same gesture, and Agnes realizes that it is not uniquely her own. She feels that it is a “forgery” and tries to inhibit it. However, old habits die hard, and the gesture has already become a part of who Agnes is.

Immortality becomes an extended meditation on the impossibility of any gesture, face or individual being truly unique. Kundera expresses this economically as an aphorism: “many people, few gestures.” Throughout the novel, Kundera captures the experience of the fundamental insubstantiality and contingency of human existence, and portrays the various strategies that his characters use in their attempts to overcome these feelings. They strive to become

immortal in the same sense that Achilles chooses immortal glory through a heroic death in battle, rather than a long, peaceful but ultimately forgettable life. By attempting to demonstrate their originality or uniqueness, the characters in *Immortality* strive to challenge their discomfiting sense of *not being real*. They seem guided by the sense that to assert their individuality would lend some weight to their experience. In fact, Kundera whimsically tells us toward the end of the book that it should be entitled *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, but that he has unfortunately already given this name to a previous novel.

The search for that which is real, original or authentic is a distinctive feature of our contemporary culture. The term authenticity is used to refer to a host of different concepts that overlap to varying degrees. Authenticity is sometimes equated with being original or unique, as is the case with Agnes’ aspirations in Kundera’s novel. Authenticity is also conceptualized as choosing one’s own life, being true to one’s self, natural, spontaneous, and *real*. Authenticity implies knowing one’s own inner experience and feelings and being guided by them. It is sometimes assumed that authenticity involves revealing personal information or one’s *real* or *true* feelings to others.

In many respects the notion of authenticity is as problematic as it is ubiquitous. To begin with the concept can lead to confusion. There is also a concern that the imperative to be authentic is associated with a culture of narcissism—a culture that encourages people to “be themselves” without concern for the needs of others (Lasch, 1979; Lunbeck, 2014). In addition, the assumption that there is an underlying true self to be revealed is inconsistent with the postmodern view of the self as decentered or plural (Fairfield, 2001). Despite these problems, the pervasiveness of authenticity as a general cultural value has become increasingly mirrored in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking. This is particularly true among relational theorists. As Stephen Mitchell suggested in the early 1990s, there has been a general movement away from Freud’s emphasis on renouncing one’s infantile fantasies and illusions and accepting the reality principle, toward an emphasis on

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cultivating an experience of vitality and coming to *feel real* (Mitchell, 1993). The underlying assumptions are that (a) many patients suffer from a lack of authenticity in their experience and in their contact with other people, (b) authenticity is an important quality in the analyst, and (c) the authentic encounter between that analyst and patient is an important dimension of therapeutic action. Mitchell (1993) cautioned that the search for authenticity should not be confused with the search for an invariant core aspect of the self that is more or less true. He maintained that the quality of authenticity in both patients and therapists is fundamentally ambiguous, and often more discernable in its absence than its presence. From his perspective, we cannot distinguish between authentic versus nonauthentic statements or personal disclosures on the basis of their contents. These distinctions can only be made on the basis of whether it *feels right* and suits both the external context, and the internal emotional context.

In addition to this emphasis on feeling right and contextual fittedness, clinical examples illustrating the mutative effects of authenticity often emphasize the importance of spontaneity and the analyst's willingness to put himself or herself on the line in a personal way that may involve taking a risk (Greenberg, 2001). Authentic gestures of this type may, for example, include the analyst's self-revelation or disclosure, acknowledging his or her values or motivations, negotiating the parameters and boundaries of the treatment, or responding to the patient in a fashion that emerges spontaneously in the moment. A common feature of these examples is that they all in one way or another involve breaking the frame of classical psychoanalysis, or "throwing away the book" (Hoffman, 1998). Some authors prefer to speak about the role of improvisation in psychoanalysis rather than spontaneity (e.g., Knoblauch, 2001; Nachmanovitch, 2001; Ringstrom, 2001). Ringstrom (2007) for example, maintains that the problem with the concept of spontaneity is that a spontaneous act can have a narcissistic quality to it (a common theme in critiques of the concept of authenticity) that fails to take into account the current needs or state of being of the other. He distinguishes between the notion of spontaneity, which emphasizes the unpremeditated, nonrule-following aspects of an act, versus improvisation, which combines the emphasis on spontaneity with the notion of fittedness. According to him, improvisation is underpinned by or embodies what he terms a "relational ethic"—an ethic of mutuality, coauthorship, subject-to-subject relating, or intersubjectivity.

In a related vein the Boston Change Process Study Group (2010) places particular emphasis on the therapeutic value of what they refer to as *moments of meeting* between patient and therapist, which highlight the valuable interplay between established relational patterns and spontaneity. These moments of meeting take place in the context of what they call *now moments*, that is, moments in which ". . . the established nature of the relationship and usual way of being-with-each-other is implicitly called into question" (Stern, 2004, p. 168). These *now moments* call upon the therapist to step outside of his or her typical therapeutic stance, and to respond in an authentic and spontaneous fashion that is ". . . a well fitted response to the crisis created by the now moment" (Stern, 2004, p. 220). The Boston Process Study Group's (BPSGs) perspective also incorporates the notion of *fittedness* into their conceptualization of *moments of meeting*. It is not enough for the analyst to respond authentically, in the sense of stepping outside of

role and acting in a spontaneous fashion that is marked by his or her *personal signature*.

This act must be responsive to the unique configuration of the moment, thereby facilitating an experience of intersubjective connection between patient and therapist in which there is a type of interpenetration of minds that permits the patient and therapist to feel "I know that you know that I know" (Stern, 2004, p. 75).

The Origin and Evolution of the Concept of Authenticity

As this brief summary suggests, the concept of authenticity, while clearly important in contemporary psychoanalytic discourse, is by no means straightforward. It has a number of possible meanings and is used in various ways by different theorists. Given this complexity and the absence of a uniform understanding of what we mean when we speak about authenticity, it is worth exploring the cultural and historical forces that have influenced the emergence and development of this value.

In historical terms, the concept of authenticity is a relatively new ideal that evolved in Western Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries (Guignon, 2004; Taylor, 1989, 1992). This period of time was marked by the breakdown of the traditional feudal order, an increase in social mobility, the emergence of capitalism, and an evolving sense of individualism. Trilling (1972) suggests that the origins of authenticity as a moral value can be traced to an earlier tradition emerging in 16th century Europe that came to view sincerity as an important virtue. The ascendance of sincerity as cultural value may itself have been linked to a growing distinction between an inner self that is viewed as real versus a public self that is seen as artificial. In addition, the emergence of a growing middle class based on the acquisition of trade-based wealth led to an increasing preoccupation with the art of self-presentation as a way of gaining entrance to the higher echelons of society. This in turn may have led to a growing appreciation of sincerity as a virtue, because the sincere individual can be trusted not to misrepresent his or own motives for personal gain (Trilling, 1972).

In contrast to sincerity as a means to achieve social repute, the value of authenticity places greater emphasis on the nature of one's relationship to oneself. In the same way that the rise of the value of sincerity can be understood as being linked to cultural changes implicating the destabilization of traditional social structures and an increase in individualism, the emergence of authenticity as a value can be understood as reflecting further developments in the direction of this trajectory. One factor relevant to emergence of authenticity as a value was an inward turn consistent with the spirit of the Protestant Reformation. Here the emphasis was on the importance establishing a personal relationship with God rather than relating to the divine through the mediating influence of the clergy and other ecclesiastical authorities. In Luther's famous words when he was ordered to recant his heresy: "Here I stand. I can do no other," thus, proclaiming his ultimate responsibility to the inner authority of his conscience rather than the external authority of the Pope.

A second dimension can be traced to the emergence of the Romantic tradition in 18th century Europe. The Romantic movement held that truth is discovered not, as Enlightenment thinkers believed, through scientific investigation or by logic, but through immersion in our deepest feelings. The Romantic movement's

emphasis on subjective emotional experience and passion directly challenged Enlightenment ideals, especially those concerning the rationalization of religion and the mechanistic worldview associated with the rise of science. Romanticism can also be understood as an attempt to grapple with the emerging sense of alienation and meaninglessness associated with the early blows to the traditional social order, the growth of secularization, the rise of capitalism and mass production, and increased social mobility. Keenly sensing industrial society's inclination toward conformity and its capacity to dehumanize, the Romantic movement was associated with a distrust of society, alongside an implicit belief in the existence of an inner "true self" that is in harmony with nature. Conventional social rituals were seen as artificial and empty instruments of class society, while passion and creative expressiveness were viewed as natural and real. The growing tendency to experience traditional rituals as meaningless can also be understood in part as a byproduct of the inward turn associated with the Protestant tradition.

Romantic philosophers and poets attempted to overcome the disenchantment of modernity associated with the Enlightenment and to reconnect the individual to the cosmos by establishing a linkage between self-feeling, nature and the cosmic order. Rousseau (1712–1778) is often credited with first articulating the notion of authenticity as a compelling way of capturing an important cultural shift that was already taking place in the 18th century. This shift involved a changing conceptualization of the relationship between self and society that emphasized the importance of looking within for moral guidance rather than outward to an external authority.

Rousseau (1974) believed that people are born with a natural form of self-love that motivates self-preservation, and a natural tendency toward caring about others. According to him, this natural form of self-love is corrupted by conventional socialization into a form of self-love that motivates us to seek social advancement and the esteem of others. This corrupted form of self-love is associated with ambitiousness, vanity, envy, and vengefulness. He maintained that we are born with a sensuous or bodily felt form of reason that can potentially serve as the foundation for genuine moral reasoning. Instead, however, this sensuous form of reason becomes stunted as we learn to substitute socially approved norms for our own internally derived sense of right versus wrong.

Rousseau's fundamental concerns were thus of a moral or ethical nature. He was less concerned with the Victorian ethic of sincerity than he was with our inability to distinguish between our social roles and ourselves. In other words, he was concerned with the problem of self-alienation. From his perspective it is essential for people to cultivate a type of inner autonomy to distinguish between themselves and the social roles they played. Thus, for Rousseau, inner autonomy is a precondition for genuine morality.

Various other conceptualizations of authenticity derive from the writings of German Romantic philosophers such as Herder, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Schlegel, and English romantic poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron (Taylor, 1989). These include: originality, uniqueness, passion, and spontaneous expressiveness. Kierkegaard (1813–1855), who was influenced by the Romantic tradition, provided a critical foundation for subsequent 20th century conceptualizations of authenticity. Kierkegaard's writing can be understood in part as attempt to recover what he believed to be the authentic spirit of Christianity, and in part as a critique of Hegel's metaphysics. Hegel had attempted to articulate

a philosophical system that would provide a logical basis for understanding the way in which the divine or what he termed spirit (*Geist*) progressively reveals itself over time through the impersonal workings of a dialectical process. Kierkegaard (1954) in contrast, viewed the task of philosophy not as an objective, detached, and rational search for truth but rather as a passionately committed personal quest to understand how one should live one's life. Thus, for Kierkegaard, universal truths cannot be found either through abstract philosophical reasoning or through passive or uncritical adherence to religious doctrine. They can only be found through a passionate search within. Similar to Rousseau's emphasis on the importance of inner autonomy, Kierkegaard believed that we must turn away from the influence of public opinion and convention to develop an authentic spirituality.

According to Kierkegaard the self is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, or of possibility and necessity. We are inevitably constituted by the givens of the circumstances into which we are born and by past choices and actions. At the same time, we have the freedom to choose how we will live our lives. In Kierkegaard's terms, we have the freedom to *choose ourselves*. Kierkegaard's concept of individual self-realization is the search for a subjective truth. It important to bear in mind, however, that for Kierkegaard, the subjective in this context does not in any a sense implies relativism or arbitrariness. It is subjective by virtue of the fact that the individual struggles to realize a personal relationship with God.

Kierkegaard maintained that to choose ourselves we must first become aware of our failures to act in accordance with God's plan. This awareness is experienced as despair, what Kierkegaard referred to a *sickness unto death*. He believed that the most insidious form of despair is that which we hide from ourselves. This form of self-deception makes it impossible for us to begin to grapple with our failings—a necessary stage in the process of choosing ourselves as moral agents. Ultimately, we can only assume authentic selfhood by recognizing our failures to assume responsibility for our lives, and by passionately committing ourselves to acting in alignment with God's will on an ongoing basis. In the same way that Rousseau believed that we are born with a bodily felt form of reasoning that can serve as foundation for morality, Kierkegaard believed that emotions are an immediate appraisal of what things mean to us. He distinguished, however, between genuine emotion, which can serve as the foundation for morality, versus sentimentality, which he believed is a form of emotional self-deception. Genuine emotion leads to ethical resolution and to future action. Sentimentality, for Kierkegaard, is a form of fleeting passion—feeling for the sake of feeling (Furtak, 2005).

Perhaps the most systematic philosophical attempts to grapple with the concept of authenticity can be found in the writings of Heidegger and Sartre. Both Heidegger and Sartre were clearly influenced by Kierkegaard. For both of them the themes of freedom and choice are central to their conceptualizations of authenticity, and both recognize that, as Kierkegaard suggested, human beings are a synthesis of the infinite and the finite. Both also eschewed Kierkegaard's decidedly religious formulation of authenticity.

Heidegger (1927/2008) believed that the tradition of Western philosophy culminates in a type of nihilism, and that this is the result of having lost sight of or of taking for granted the true nature of *being*. Deeply influenced by his mentor, Husserl (1962), Heidegger adapted his phenomenological method for purposes of

studying the nature of *being*. He considered the fundamental goal of his philosophical project to be ontological in nature, in the sense that he was interested in investigating the nature of existence. Heidegger maintained that the superordinate value was the pursuit of *authentic being*. He believed that we are thrown into a life situation that is not of our own making and it is only through the act of choosing ourselves from the ground of the possibilities available to us that we can be authentic.

Consistent with the emphasis on the importance of autonomy common to Rousseau and Kierkegaard, Heidegger highlights the importance of separating oneself out from the received view, or what he refers to *the they* (*das Man*). Normally, we live in a state of *fallenness* (to use Heidegger's term). We flee from the responsibility of our freedom or our *potentiality-for-being* by retreating into the distractions of our everyday life. These distractions consist of our everyday preoccupations, pursuit of goals or ambitions we have unreflectively assumed, the indulgence in entertainments and gratifications. This state of fallenness distracts us from the reality of our mortality and the inevitability of our nonexistence.

It is only when we confront the inevitability of our own deaths that we are shocked out of our state of lethargy and are able to actively choose our own *potentiality-for-being*. It is in this context that Heidegger emphasizes the importance of what he refers to as *resoluteness*—of seizing hold of the present moment and resolutely making it our own. In contrast to Kierkegaard, who argued for the importance of passionately committing ourselves to a moral and spiritual way of life, what mattered to Heidegger was the intensity and decisiveness of one's resolve—not the content. For Heidegger, there are no criteria for evaluating whether one's choices are ethical or not.

A number of authors have suggested that Heidegger's subordination of ethics to ontology is problematic and that his efforts to illuminate the nature of *being* fail to adequately grapple with fully with the existence of the other (e.g., Gadamer, 2003; Habermas, 1987; Levinas, 1961). For Heidegger the other is relegated to the role of one aspect of that which we are thrown into or within which we are embedded. His fundamental concern remains with the *unconcealment of being* itself—a recovery of a primordial and sacred sense of rootedness in the cosmos that modern man has lost. One way of thinking about it is that Heidegger's ontological focus was, in part, an effort to deal with the disenchantment of the modern world.

While Sartre (1943/1956) was highly indebted to Heidegger intellectually he was also deeply influenced by his personal experiences in World War II as a prisoner of war and a participant in the French resistance. In contrast to Heidegger's philosophy, which subordinates human concerns to *being*, Sartre's writing has humanistic sensibility to it. He is concerned with the themes of human freedom, and choice and responsibility as well as the social and political implications of the choices we make. Coming from a post-Nietzschean perspective, Sartre takes it as a given that "God is dead" and that we are thus, "condemned to be free." While for Kierkegaard, the sickness unto death is the consequence of failing to align ourselves with God's plan for us, for Sartre, existential despair is the consequence of living in a world without any inherent meaning. This absence of inherent meaning, described by Sartre as the experience of *nausea* (Sartre, 1975), is akin to Albert Camus' experience of the *absurd* (Camus, 1991).

Following in Kierkegaard's footsteps, and drawing from Heidegger, Sartre maintained that humans are a combination of *transcendence* (radical freedom, possibility, and the infinite) and *facticity* (the givens of one's life situation constituted by factors such as the family one is born into, the inevitability of death, and the givens constituted by the previous choices one has made). Authenticity involves the acknowledgment of both one's own transcendence and one's facticity. Inauthenticity, or what Sartre refers to as *bad faith* (*mauvaise foi*), involves a failure to acknowledge either one's transcendence or one's facticity. It is a flight from responsibility that involves an act of self-deception. For example, one can fail to acknowledge that one has the freedom to choose one's actions (e.g., an alcoholic who fails to acknowledge that he can choose not to drink), or one can fail to acknowledge that one is partially constituted by one's previous actions (e.g., I have acted cowardly in the past).

In contrast to Kierkegaard, who was attempting to recover the authentic spirit of Christianity, Sartre was interested in articulating a meaningful guide for living, in the absence of a divine foundation. The foundational value in his conceptualization of authenticity is *freedom*. For Sartre, living authentically involves both accepting and choosing our own freedom, and valuing the freedom of the other. However, his justification for valuing the other's freedom is not entirely clear. Sartre was deeply concerned with ethical issues, and he recognized that his conceptualization of authenticity fell short of producing a fully satisfactory foundation for ethics. He continued in his efforts to formulate such a foundation throughout his lifetime, but much of this writing was unpublished at the time of his death (Anderson, 1993; Heter, 2008).

Authenticity and American Culture

Authenticity began to emerge as an American ideal after World War II, with the dissemination of French existentialism. The ideas of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus were introduced at the levels of both popular and elite culture. Although French existentialism did not have the same impact on American academic philosophy as it did in France, it did have a substantial impact in literary and artistic circles and became extremely fashionable among middle class college students (Fulton, 1999).

A second important influence was the underground countercultural ferment that began in the 1950s. The United States had emerged from World War II as the dominant economic power and the most prosperous nation in the world. It was an era of great economic and material abundance. During this period, any White male high school graduate could reasonably expect to earn enough money to support a family, own a house, a car, abundant material goods and household appliances, and send his children to college (Gosse, 2005).

On the face of things this was a time of prosperity, abundance, and contentment. It was also, however, a time of conformity. One important factor in this respect was the rise of anticommunism after the disintegration of the wartime alliance between the America and the Soviet Union, the onset of the nuclear arms race, and the emergence of the cold War. Americans united around the ideal of the supremacy of the American way of life over communism, and a fear of infiltration from within by communist agents that was inflamed by the McCarthy investigations. This led to a stifling of political debate and a discrediting of left wing political factions

that traditionally had challenged the social inequities of the capitalist system.

Continuing the accelerated industrial productivity that was mobilized to arm the United States and its allies for the war, American consumerism kicked into high gear. Increasingly sophisticated technologies and mass production provided affordable household utilities and consumer goods. The ability to purchase and choose from among a wide array of products came to be equated with American freedom, individualism, and equality. Increasingly sophisticated advertising strategies manufactured the desire for a proliferating array of new products and brands marketed to symbolize the achievement of the American dream. Mass production of inexpensive TV sets made them available to a substantial majority of the population, and advertisers has a vested interest in sponsoring bland and inoffensive TV shows that represented the average American household as the White middle class nuclear family. American politics became dominated by a liberal center consensus, increasingly aligned with consumer capitalism.

Although it is true that the postwar prosperity led to a substantial increase in the standard of living for some segments of the American population, significant social inequities continued to persist. New suburbs that were developed tended to be segregated along lines of social class and ethnic lines. The GI bill, which contributed to a substantial increase in the proportion of White male veterans receiving postsecondary education, had little impact on women, working class men and Blacks. In the 1940s and 1950s a cultural avant-garde emerged among American artists, writers and musicians that challenged the conformist cultural norms of the dominant post war social order. This avant-garde rejected the values of the corporate liberal center and the artistic realism of the discredited Stalinist left. In the art world painters such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko developed a form of abstract expressionism, influenced in some respects by European surrealists of the 1920s, that rejected formal traditional artistic forms and that valued subjectivism, expressiveness, and spontaneity (Belgrad, 1998).

Bebop jazz, which emerged toward the end of the war in Harlem jam sessions, was in important respects a statement of Black pride and defiance. Black musicians such as Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Sonny Rollins, Dizzy Gillespie, and later Miles Davis, broke away from the swing tradition of jazz that had preceded it, and began introducing new musical conventions, that broke with the European orchestral style. In an effort to create a culturally authentic form of music, they built upon musical elements characteristic of Black music such call and response, prosodic tone, and polyrhythm. Call and response as a musical convention is can be found in many traditional cultural settings, but it was particularly significant in the context of Black culture where call and response patterns of singing, was commonly used to deal with the hard work and repetitive monotony of working as part of a slave gang. This call and response format evolved into the improvisational and conversational style that was to become a central feature of jazz music (Belgrad, 1998).

The beat authors and poets: Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsburg, William Burroughs, and others, were another important influence on the emergence of the culture of authenticity and in the United States. As was the case with the bebop musicians, the beats were outsiders in their own ways. Kerouac came from a working class French Canadian background, Ginsburg was Jewish and gay, and

Burroughs, although he came from a wealthy southern family, was gay, and addicted to drugs of one kind or another most of his life. Kerouac and Ginsburg met at Columbia University. Kerouac had dropped out and Ginsburg was suspended shortly after they met. As outsiders to the dominant American mainstream, Kerouac and Ginsburg embraced their marginal status and identified with the defiant and rebellious spirit of the bebop musicians. Kerouac attempted to model his writing style on the spontaneous, and improvisational style of bebop jazz (Morgan, 2011).

The New Left, the Counterculture, and Humanistic Psychology

The New Left emerged in the 1960s, as a successor to the American communist party that had been weakened by both McCarthyism, and the growing recognition of the totalitarian nature of Russian communism. In contrast to the traditional American left which consisted of an alliance between leftist intellectuals and blue collar workers, the New Left consisted primarily of college students, coming from financially comfortable middle class families, who rejected mainstream, consumer culture establishment values and embraced aspects of left wing ideology, and a series of progressive causes including the civil rights movement, gender equality, proabortion policies, and gay rights (Gosse, 2005). Other important unifying themes were the antinuclear movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s and perhaps most explosively, the Vietnam War protests.

What we broadly think of as the counterculture of the 1960s was not synonymous with the New Left, but there was a reasonable degree of overlap and mutual influence. The counterculture as a broad cultural phenomenon did not consistently have an organized political philosophy or agenda, but it shared the New Left's critique of mainstream establishment values, embraced the importance of liberation from oppressive forces and instinctually repressive values, and prioritized the value of personal or psychological liberation, if not political liberation.

The emergence of the counterculture of the 1960s coincided with the development of the humanistic psychology tradition. Humanistic psychology emerged as an alternative to the dominant psychoanalytic culture and the emerging behavioral tradition. Abraham Maslow, considered the founder of humanistic psychology, argued that the psychologically healthy individual must have the capacity to stand apart from his or her culture—to be inner directed. He argued that human beings are born with the innate need to realize their own unique potentials. He referred to this needs as one of self-actualization.

Similarly, Carl Rogers the founder of client-centered therapy argued that human beings have a natural tendency toward self-actualization and that the therapist's task to facilitate this process through providing the core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence (Roger's term for genuineness or authenticity). Another key figure in the emergence of humanistic psychology was the German émigré analyst, Fritz Perls. Perls, in collaboration with his wife, Laura and the American social critic Paul Goodman, developed gestalt therapy, in part as a critique of what they saw as the conformist, atomistic and intellectualist qualities of the psychoanalysis of the 1950s.

Rollo May, who graduated from the William Alanson White Institute, was already a practicing analyst when he began reading

in the European existential tradition. He played a key role in introducing existential thinking to the broader psychotherapy community in the United States, and he placed an important emphasis on aspects of existential thinking including the emphasis on the roles that courage, choice and personal responsibility, play in the process of living authentically (May, 1969). May's contributions, however, had a considerably greater impact on the development of humanistic psychology than they did in the psychoanalytic world.

The politics and values of the New Left and the counterculture became fused with the values and language of humanistic psychology (Rossinow, 1998). The ideal of authenticity provided the counterculture with a framework for critiquing what it viewed as the conformist and repressive aspects of the prosperous and complacent culture that had come to dominate American values and politics during the postwar boom. It provided young people with a language for distinguishing between the outer-directed American character style produced by the rapidly evolving consumer culture (Reisman, 1950) versus the inner-directed, "real" or authentic lifestyle to which they aspired.

The Evolution of Authenticity as a Psychoanalytic Ideal

The introduction of the concept of authenticity into psychoanalytic thinking is most likely attributable Ludwig Binswanger (1881–1966). Binswanger, a colleague of Freud's, turned to Heidegger's philosophy in an effort to find an alternative to Freud's metapsychology, which he viewed as reductionistic and mechanistic. His thinking was strongly influenced by Heidegger's emphasis on human, choice, freedom, and responsibility. And consistent with Heidegger, Binswanger argued for the importance of understanding the individual in holistic terms as a being-in-the-world, rather than as a system of organic functions.

Fromm (1947), a cofounder of the William Alanson White Institute, played significant role in bringing an existential sensibility to the interpersonal tradition of psychoanalysis. Fromm, to a greater extent than either Harry Stack Sullivan or Clara Thompson, privileged the authentic encounter between analyst and patient as a central ingredient in the change process. While Fromm's thinking about the meaning and importance of authenticity was influenced by many sources including Martin Buber, he was not interested in developing a systematic conceptualization of authenticity (Buber, 1923/1958).

Influenced by Marxist thinking and his collaboration with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Fromm was critical of what he considered to be the dehumanizing and alienating effects of capitalism. Fromm's emphasis on the importance of the authentic human encounter had a sustained impact on the American interpersonal tradition, which tends to assume the dimension of authenticity as a background value. In addition, Thompson, who had been analyzed by Sandor Ferenczi, emphasized the mutual nature of the analytic relationship. It is important to bear in mind, however, that while the American interpersonal tradition may have always valued the mutual and authentic dimensions of the analytic relationship, the concept of authenticity itself was not a focus sustained theoretical interrogation.

It was with the emergence of the relational tradition that authenticity emerged as a central concern within psychoanalysis. Many of the authors who played seminal roles in the development

of the relational turn in psychoanalysis, came of age during the turbulent 1960s. While humanistic psychologists and psychotherapists such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Fritz Perls are rarely cited in the psychoanalytic literature it seems unlikely to me that the early relational thinkers, would not have internalized some of the values of the counterculture: a challenging stance toward authority, a questioning of traditional hierarchies, a contempt for and experience of alienation from social conventions, a prizing of individualism, self-expressiveness, and spontaneity, and an emphasis on the importance of authenticity.

A central thrust for the first generation of relational authors involved challenging the doctrinal and technical orthodoxy of the classical psychoanalytic tradition. In the same way that authenticity, spontaneity, and improvisation functioned as challenges to the mainstream in postwar America of the 1950s and subsequently in the 1960s, the values of spontaneity and improvisation functioned as challenges to the canons of American classical psychoanalysis. Another factor influencing the key role that authenticity would come to play as a value in relational thinking was the process of integrating American interpersonal thinking with British object relations theory. Winnicott (1965) in particular had placed the distinction between the real self and the false self at the heart of his approach. For Winnicott authenticity is associated with spontaneity insofar as the experience of coming to feel real emerges out of the capacity of the caretaker to recognize what he referred to as the infant's *spontaneous gestures*. In some respects Winnicott implied that the analyst's capacity to respond to the patient spontaneously is important insofar as he spoke about the importance of *playing* in the analytic process. One does not get the sense either from his writing or from accounts of his patients that the analyst's authenticity was important for Winnicott in the same way that it is in the contemporary relational tradition.

In addition to the function that the values of authenticity and spontaneity have played in challenging tradition and social hierarchy it is worth teasing out some of the other functions that they play in psychoanalytic discourse. As discussed previously, one of the byproducts of modernization and the various factors associated with it (e.g., the growth of individualism, the turn inward, and the fragmentation of traditional social structures) is that established rituals have a tendency to be experienced as empty and meaningless (Seligman et al., 2008; Sennett, 1974). In the context of this emptiness there is an intensified need for styles of interaction that are tailored to the unique subjectivities and needs of the patient-analyst dyad participants.

The construction of self in contemporary Western society in general and the United States in particular takes place in the context of a hyper-individualistic and highly alienated culture in which the traditional social structures and rituals for linking people together are highly fragmented. Given the tendency in our culture to experience conventional rituals as artificial and empty, improvisation is a style of interaction that is particularly well suited to integrating the separate subjectivities of patient and analyst in a uniquely personalized way. In the same way that Charlie Parker's jazz is more "conversational" in nature than Duke Ellington's, one could say that the music or jazz of a contemporary psychoanalytic sensibility can be viewed as more conversational in nature than music of a classical psychoanalytic sensibility.

In addition to the functions that spontaneity and improvisation play in connecting independent subjectivities in a personally tai-

lored way, spontaneous acts feel natural, real or vital by virtue of the fact that they are not experienced as the product of conscious deliberation. In fact any intentional effort to be spontaneous is doomed to failure. Athletes, artists, musicians, and performers all know that while effortful practice is a precondition for exceptional performance, ultimately it has to, in sense, *happen of its own accord*. Writers and artists speak of waiting for the muse to speak to them or through them. Spontaneous acts are thus, experienced as originating from a source outside the self as conventionally conceived. When we act spontaneously we experience ourselves as part of a larger force or field that encompasses us. Moments of spontaneity can provide us with a temporary experience of being part of a larger unity.

Authenticity and the Ethical Dimension in Psychoanalysis

Is there a connection between the role that authenticity plays in contemporary psychoanalysis and the ethical realm? As previously mentioned, Ringstrom (2007) argues that improvisation can be conceptualized as a kind of *relational ethic* insofar as it implies an attunement both to one's own emerging experience as well as the experience of the other. It is important to recognize, however, that this type of attunement does not necessarily imply an ethical stance. For example, one can have the ability to be exquisitely attuned to one's own experience and the experience of the other, and use this skill for purposes of manipulation. Of course Ringstrom would want to preclude this possibility. In fact his description of intersubjectivity as a type of *subject to subject* relating implies an *ethic* of mutual recognition.

Certainly, the emphasis on the importance of mutual recognition in relational thinking has an implicit ethical dimension. For example, Benjamin (2004) makes it clear that there is a moral dimension to her conceptualization of intersubjectivity as the capacity to relate to the other as a subject rather than as an object. Another important link between relational conceptualizations of authenticity and the ethical realm is the assertion that analysts cannot hide behind theoretical canons, but must ultimately accept personal responsibility for the theoretical and technical choices that they make (e.g., Aron, 1999; Cushman, 1996; Hoffman, 1998; Stern, 2015).

Part of the process of accepting responsibility for our clinical choices involves an ongoing process of reflecting on the question of whether they truly are consistent with our values and commitments. A critical component of an authentic mode of being thus, involves (a) committing ourselves to acting in accordance with our chosen values, and (b) both recognizing and acknowledging when we have failed to do so. Authenticity has a temporal dimension to it. As clinicians we cannot evaluate the authenticity of a specific clinical choice without reference to the values we have chosen. It is not sufficient for something I say or do, in response to my patient, to *feel* authentic—unless that feeling, at least in part, reflects my implicit evaluation of the relationship between my response and my overall value system. Authentic clinical choices must be made, not just within the emergent relational context, but also within the context of the identities and value systems that we have chosen or constructed. Our value systems and identities can of course evolve. In fact, this process of evolution in response to the encounter with new clinical challenges is intrinsic to both a relational sensibility and to what can be thought of as *dialogical conception* of authenticity.

Standing for Something

Taylor (1989, 1992) argues that it is impossible to discover or create one's identity in isolation. In other words the process of self-creation or self-definition inevitably involves dialogue and negotiation with others. Moreover, for the notion of defining oneself or articulating one's own values to have meaning, it is essential that the choices we make matter within a context of values beyond ourselves—the context of our relationship to others. If all choices are equal then the process of choosing itself becomes trivial. In a cultural ethos now given to relativism, the question of what matters becomes more difficult. To quote Taylor:

Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (Taylor, 1992, p. 41)

Guignon (2004) argues that authenticity requires more than making a decision to identify with something. We need to identify with something that counts to avoid trivializing the meaning of authenticity. And the process of clarifying what counts and how one should act can only take place within the context of the shared cultural traditions and social practices that form the background of intelligibility for our beliefs, commitments, feelings, and decisions. Authenticity involves the ability to be a reflective individual who discerns what is genuinely worth pursuing in the social context in which one is situated.

In one sense the analyst's clinical choices always reflect his or her values. The question, however, is whether the analyst's choices and actions in the context of those clinical moments that matter can be counted on to reflect a good faith or authentic effort to act with human decency and *moral integrity*. Grant (1997) maintains that the term *integrity* actually provides a more accurate rendering of the value that was crucial to Rousseau, than the term *authenticity*. She argues that the contemporary meaning of the term authenticity has been colored by philosophical developments such as romanticism and existentialism that postdate Rousseau, even though his thinking did influence their development. As she puts it: "Authenticity's only command is to 'be yourself.' But Rousseau seeks goodness . . . the use of authenticity as a substitute for Rousseau's terms, conceals the moral content of Rousseau's vision" (Grant, 1997, p. 59).

What does it mean for one to have integrity? Integrity involves *standing for something* – that is, standing for what in one's own judgment is worth doing (Calhoun, 1995). Integrity involves the integration of the various parts of oneself—ones desires, evaluations, and commitments—into a whole. This type of integration is not incompatible with a multiple selves perspective, although it is incompatible with dissociative processes that are defensively motivated or what Stern (1993) terms *strong dissociation*. It involves a process of deliberating about one's values and deciding which ones are core—in the sense of being constitutive of who one is as a person, and which ones are less important (Frankfurt, 1998; Williams, 1982). And it involves resolving to act in accordance with these values, and then doing so consistently—without one's resolution being undermined by factors such as self-deception, weakness of will or the desire for approval from others. Integrity also entails recognizing that one can only decide what is worth doing from within one own deliberative

point of view, and having an openness to modifying ones values and decisions in light of others' points of view. This openness to other's points of view is essential, because without it, what appears to be integrity can be conflated with qualities such as rigidity, arrogance, or fanaticism (Calhoun, 1995).

One way of conceptualizing the link between the recovery of the ethical dimension of authenticity and the search for vitality is to emphasize the experience of *coming to feel real* as a natural outgrowth of *standing for something* (to use Calhoun's phrase)—as a byproduct of moral deliberation, resolution and action, rather than as the goal in and of itself. To be clear, I am not speaking about moral deliberation as an abstract philosophical process, but rather as the process of actively struggling with the question of how to live one's life in the face of the difficult and sometimes insoluble ethical dilemmas that patients bring into treatment on an everyday basis.

Conclusion

To bring things full circle, the search for authenticity and the *unbearable lightness of being* are two sides of the coin. The pursuit of authenticity entails a search for solid ground to stand on in the context of a highly individualistic, secularized culture without any absolute foundational values; a search for meaning in the context of a disenchanting postmodern era. Given the centrality of authenticity as a contemporary cultural value, it is not surprising that it has become an important value in contemporary psychoanalytic writing as well. Because of the ambiguity of the concept and the multiple ways that it is used, however, it is important to interrogate its meaning and to consider the various cultural and historical forces that have shaped our understanding of authenticity, as well as the various ways that we apply the concept in psychoanalytic discourse. It is also important to examine the implications of the way we conceptualize authenticity for our understanding of the nature of the good life. This essay is a preliminary effort to examine some of these themes, and to suggest important dimensions to keep in mind when thinking about the role of authenticity in psychoanalytic theory and practice. While different conceptualizations of authenticity emphasize different dimensions, I have suggested that one common theme involves the importance of engaging in an ongoing process of separating oneself out from the received view, developing an internalized value system, and striving to act in accordance with these values. Finally, I have argued for the importance of (a) conceptualizing authenticity in dialogical or intersubjective terms, (b) reconstructing the link between authenticity and the ethical dimension, and (c) emphasizing the process of achieving the experience of *coming to feel real* as a byproduct of moral deliberation and struggle, rather than as a goal in and of itself.

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