Authenticity

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Introduction

Sartre's concern with individual authenticity pervades his early philosophical and literary writings. Yet his conception of authenticity is somewhat elusive. The only significant point he makes directly about authenticity in *Being and Nothingness* is in a footnote. There, he tells us that authenticity is the opposite of bad faith, but goes on to say that the description of authenticity 'has no place here' (B&N: 94n). In two immediately subsequent works, *Existentialism Is A Humanism* and *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre argues that authenticity is the fundamental virtue in his ethical outlook and he characterises various examples of authentic and inauthentic ways of living, but in neither work does he give a clear explication of the idea of authenticity itself. His notes from that period, posthumously published as *Notebooks for an Ethics*, make it abundantly clear that he intended to construct a complete account of ethics on the basis of authenticity, but since that project never came to fruition we are left without a detailed statement of the idea itself that Sartre considered worthy of publication.

Despite this, a commitment to the importance of authenticity drives Sartre's existentialism. It does so primarily through an exploration of its absence. In plays and novels as well as in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores the ways in which people fail to be authentic and the damage this causes to their own lives and to the lives of those they affect. Indeed, one might even view these explorations of bad faith as attempts to discern the contours of its negation, his ideal of authenticity. These discussions make it clear, moreover, that for Sartre authenticity should not be confused with sincerity or good faith. The ideal of sincerity requires us to recognise and accept the motivations that drive our behaviour. The ideal of good faith requires us to inspect our own motivations honestly with a view to accepting who we are. But in Sartre's view, the very idea that we must accept the motivations that we have, rather than seek to shape our motivations, is at the very core of bad faith.

The importance of this is brought out well in Charles Larmore's recent book, *The Practices of the Self*. If authenticity is being true to the person that you really are, then this need not be understood in terms of some set of fixed motivations. Larmore sets this idea up in two dimensions. He rejects the idea of authenticity as identifying with a fixed or essential self, embracing instead the idea that inauthenticity is the denial of the formal structure of human existence. In this respect, Larmore agrees with Sartre. The second dimension concerns the relation between oneself and society. For the idea of being true to one's essential motivations has often been seen to require resisting pressure to conform to the tastes, goals, and values of society. Larmore retains this traditional aspect of the idea of authenticity, though he refines it in a certain way. Through this aspect of his idea of authenticity, Larmore develops a critique of Sartre's ideas that authenticity is the opposite of bad faith and is the fundamental virtue.

In this chapter, I argue that Larmore is mistaken about the nature of authenticity and that Sartre's position is preferable. I begin by presenting Larmore's position in more detail. Next, I raise a problem for Larmore that reflects a consideration that shapes

Sartre's discussion of bad faith. I then trace this problem to Larmore's understanding of our epistemic access to ourselves through reflection. Larmore bases his account on Sartre's theory of pure and impure reflection, but I will present a different reading of Sartre here. Finally, I will show how the account of reflection that I ascribe to Sartre grounds a conception of authenticity in which identifying with the formal structure of oneself as a being that undertakes commitments is allied not with absence of external influence, but rather with recognition of the motivations to which one has already committed oneself. The basic structure of Sartre's account of authenticity is thereby uncovered, and his ideas that authenticity is the opposite of bad faith and is the fundamental virtue are both shown to survive Larmore's critique.

Larmore's Account of Authenticity

If authenticity includes being true to the kind of being that you are, then to give this idea substance we need an account of the kind of being that you are. Larmore argues that we are essentially normative beings, meaning that our identities are determined by the commitments we undertake to think, speak, and act in certain ways. He argues that such commitment is essential to both belief and desire. Beliefs 'function as standing directives that give the agent the (rational) obligation to think and act in accord with their presumed truth', while desires likewise consist in 'orienting the conduct, intellectual as well as practical, of the individual' (2011: 81). Larmore presents this as a more precise rendering of Sartre's thesis that subjectivity consists in a relationship to oneself that is not a matter of introspective knowledge. 'The intimacy in which the subject necessarily lives with himself and that Sartre intended to express', writes Larmore, 'is practical in nature, consisting in the subject's thinking or acting only by way of committing himself' (2011: 81).

Although all thought and action makes such commitment, Larmore argues, we sometimes think and act in ways that imply that this is not so. Thought and action are

authentic only when they do not imply the denial that our beliefs, desires, and actions consist in undertaking commitments. When we are entirely absorbed in what we are thinking about or what we are doing, there is no possibility of such a denial, and hence no possibility of inauthenticity: we coincide perfectly with ourselves. Larmore calls this 'being natural' (e.g. 2011: 27-30, 144-5). The possibility of inauthenticity arises only when we are reflectively aware of ourselves.

Larmore divides reflection into two categories, 'cognitive reflection' and 'practical reflection' (2011: 24). These differ in their basic structure: cognitive reflection is a kind of thought, practical reflection a kind of action. When directed towards oneself, cognitive reflection is the consideration of how one would look to other people (2011: 83-88). When directed towards the world, cognitive reflection is consideration of what reasons other people would have for believing, desiring, or acting in a particular way (2011: 68-76). Cognitive reflection, then, is thinking about oneself or about the world from the perspective of others. These others can be particular people one knows, imaginary people, or the impersonal abstraction of society in general. Because this cognitive reflection is concerned with the perspective of others, it is always inauthentic: one commits oneself to a particular thought or desire, but one does so on the basis that someone else would do so (2011: 144).

Practical reflection, on the other hand, has authentic and inauthentic varieties. Practical reflection is the explicit endorsement of beliefs, feelings, or actions (2011: 24). 'I love wearing my leather jacket!' is one of Larmore's examples of such conscious avowal (2011: 147). This act of avowal is not 'a judgment about what we should do', but 'an explicit intention to do this or that' (2011: 71). It is inauthentic when we simultaneously distance ourselves from the fact that we are making this commitment. Larmore gives two examples. One is avowing an intention as though it were merely the effect of an outside force. 'Duty compels me to do it!', one might announce, as though one has not chosen to do it (2011: 148). The other is Emma Bovary's decision to pursue a love affair,

on grounds that it would follow from the nature that she likes to see herself as sharing with her literary heroines (2011: 147-8). In this kind of practical reflection, as in cognitive reflection, 'we assimilate ourselves to another' and so 'are denying, in effect, the very nature of what we are doing' (2011: 150).

Authentic practical reflection is the avowal or endorsement of a commitment without this denial. It is authentic because it affirms one's status as a normative being, as living by the commitments one undertakes. This and unreflective absorption in thought, feeling, or action are the only two kinds of authenticity. Of the two kinds of inauthenticity, cognitive reflection and inauthentic practical reflection, only inauthentic practical reflection is a form of bad faith. Only in this case do we experience our thoughts, feelings, and actions in a way that is 'contrary to their true tenor' and 'disfigure them by clinging to the standpoint of an onlooker' (2011: 159). In cognitive reflection, we experience ourselves as considering ourselves or the world from the standpoint of an onlooker, and that is indeed what we are doing. For this reason, Larmore rejects Sartre's equation of inauthenticity with bad faith (2011: 149, 159). What is more, argues Larmore, cognitive reflection is essential to living well, so inauthenticity is not always a bad thing. Thus, authenticity cannot be the supreme or fundamental virtue on which ethics is founded (2011: 145, 153-4, 159).

Depth of Commitment

Larmore's conceptual framework clarifies part of the structure of Sartre's idea of authenticity. Larmore is right to describe Sartre's account of being human in terms of undertaking commitments, and to identify authenticity as the recognition of this. But there is a dimension of Sartre's account of human existence that is missing from Larmore's reading of Sartre. This is the ongoing effect of commitments once they are made. Sartre thinks that attempts to undertake new commitments can run into practical difficulties rooted in other commitments one has already undertaken and that

now run deep in one's overall psychology.

Sartre illustrates this in a vignette in his novel *The Age of Reason*, published two years after *Being and Nothingness*. Daniel is aware that others see him as a sentimental person, partly on account of the cats he cares for, and he wants to prove to himself that they have got him wrong. So he resolves to drown his cats in the river. But when he reaches the water's edge, he finds that he cannot bring himself to do so (AR: 81-91). Sartre describes intentions like this, which one cannot really go through with, as 'cheques without funds to meet them' (AR: 86). He makes a similar point in his discussion of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. Freedom does not simply consist in the ability to do anything at any time, he argues, because one's motives and the reasons one finds in the world reflect one's existing projects. Freedom therefore consists in the ability to change those underlying projects. For any action of mine, it is indeed true that I 'could have done otherwise', but the important question is, 'at what price?' (B&N: 476). There is a sense in which Daniel could have drowned his cats. But he found, when the time came, that the price of doing so was one that he would not pay.

Daniel formed his intention in bad faith. He had not taken into account the resistance to carrying out this intention rooted in his love of his cats. It was, we might say, an inauthentic intention. He had not committed *himself*, the self constrained by his existing commitments, to the goal of drowning the cats (AR: 90). In this regard, Daniel resembles a character in Sartre's central discussion of bad faith in *Being and Nothingness*, the man who has had many affairs with men in the past but resists the advice of his friend, 'the champion of sincerity', to identify with his homosexuality. He resists the idea that his actions show he has a fixed nature that includes sexual attraction to men and not women. Sartre, of course, thinks that he is right to resist this idea. But the character goes wrong, Sartre thinks, in taking this as a reason to deny his homosexuality altogether. Just as the champion of sincerity is in bad faith because he pretends that we are not normative beings whose identity is bestowed by our

commitments, his friend is in bad faith because his stated intention to settle down with the right woman does not take account of the homosexual desires that he does indeed have and to which he has committed himself (B&N: 86-7).

Unless an undertaking is informed by one's existing commitments, therefore, whether these are to be respected and preserved through the undertaking or are to be overthrown in its name, the undertaking is too shallow to count as an authentic commitment. Yet such a shallow undertaking does fit Larmore's account of authentic practical reflection. Its lack of depth is not a denial of one's status as a normative being. On the contrary, it involves overplaying this status, as though one can easily commit to anything at all. Larmore comes close to addressing this problem in three passages of his book. In one, he argues that the aim of becoming a certain sort of person should be understood as undertaking a commitment that then constrains our thought and action in general (2011: 158). The kind of constraint he describes is rational: one rationally ought to respect the commitment in thought and action. The difficulty of following through on such commitments is due to the fact that they do not, of themselves, exert psychological pressure towards respecting them. The kind of commitment we are concerned with, on the other hand, is one that has been acted on repeatedly and through such habituation has come to exert psychological pressure of its own.

Larmore also comes close to addressing habituated commitment when he discusses clarifying commitments one has unreflectively undertaken in order to endorse them in practical reflection. 'Mary, for instance, is convinced that Mark has become the love of her life', he writes, 'but observing that she feels more tender toward him when he is not there than when they are together, she starts to question the nature of her attachment' (2011: 86). 'Before deciding to espouse some religious belief', he points out, 'we may want to establish whether we find it attractive because of its consoling power and not by virtue of its apparent truth'; so 'in order to know whether we are really a believer' he recommends we 'undertake to perform all the rituals and recite all the

prayers in order to observe whether we are carrying them out with the sort of conviction that is the proof of faith' (2011: 162). The observations involved these characters make about themselves, according to Larmore, are instances of cognitive reflection, since only cognitive reflection aims at knowledge. Practical reflection is the explicit endorsement of a commitment, but these characters are only aiming to discover what their commitments truly are. Cognitive reflection is always a form of inauthenticity, for Larmore, even though in cases like these it is a prelude to authentic practical reflection.

Public Behaviour and Private Experience

These passages indicate the shape that an account of practical difficulty rooted in existing commitments would have to take within Larmore's framework. One can learn of the pressure these commitments exert, on Larmore's view, only through cognitive reflection on oneself. Daniel should have taken into account what those around him already knew, that he loves his cats. The man who will not admit his homosexuality is denying something that is obvious to his friend, whether or not his friend is mistaken to see it as part of a fixed essence. Larmore holds cognitive reflection to be our only form of epistemic access to our own motivations: 'everything we know about ourselves is founded on the fundamentally public procedures of observation and inference' (2011: 135). He grounds this claim in the failure of successive philosophers to make sense of the metaphor of 'introspection' as a mode of direct access to the contents of our own minds (2011: 123-6). Sartre sometimes sounds as though he endorses a similar claim. 'Consciousness does not know its own character – unless in determining itself reflectively from the standpoint of another's point of view', he writes (B&N: 372).

But if this is the only way in which one can become aware of one's own motivations, then it is difficult to see where Daniel or the man who will not admit his homosexuality are going wrong. For both of these characters have looked at their own

past from an external perspective. Each has understood that their behaviour can be interpreted as manifesting a certain trait, but each insists that it is compatible with the absence of that trait. What these characters fail to take into account is not behaviour. Daniel fails to take into account the value his cats have for him. The man who denies his homosexuality fails to take into account his sexual attraction to men. Such values and feelings are not directly observable from an external perspective. Indeed, it seems to be Sartre's point in these vignettes that the bad faith of these characters rests on taking up an external perspective in order to conceal this crucial information.

Yet this does not commit Sartre to the view that values and feelings are inner mental states that one can become aware of through 'introspection'. In his early *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*, Sartre argued that an emotion is 'a specific manner of apprehending the world' (STE: 35). To be frightened is to experience the world as a fearful place, to be angry is to find the object of one's anger hateful (STE: 34-61). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre generalises this idea to all feelings. Disgust is experienced as the repulsiveness of disgusting objects (B&N: 620, 625-6, 635-6). But he goes further, and applies the idea to evaluative attitudes as well as to affectivity. For something to be valuable to you, on this account, is for it to be experienced as valuable in everyday engagement with the world (B&N: 62-63). This suggests that our knowledge of values and feelings requires neither introspection nor inference from behaviour. Rather, awareness of the way the world seems to us can furnish knowledge of our values and feelings. Daniel should have taken into account the value that he experiences his cats as having for him. The man who denies his homosexual desires should consider the ways in which men and women feature in his experience.

What is required is a particular kind of reflection on one's own experience. In unreflective experience, the world has a particular evaluative and affective structure, but this structure is not where one's attention is focused. One is attending to the world itself. The evaluative and affective structure is the way that world appears. To make

this structure, this mode of presentation, the object of attention is to move to another kind of experience. This is reflection on the unreflective experience of the world. Such reflection does not simply present the world again, for attention is no longer directed towards the objects that make up that world. Neither does such reflection involve an external perspective on oneself. It is not a form of Larmore's 'cognitive reflection'. Neither, finally, is it aimed at endorsing a commitment. It is not Larmore's 'practical reflection'. It is aimed at gathering information, but information about how things seem rather than about how they are. That is to say, it is concerned with phenomena, or appearances. For this reason, it is rightly called 'phenomenological reflection'.

Pure and Impure Reflection

Because values and feelings are manifested in the way the world appears, phenomenological reflection can reveal those values and feelings. Consider again Larmore's examples of cognitive reflection in the service of authentic practical reflection. Mary learns something about her relationship with Mark by reflecting on the difference between the way he features in her experience when he is absent and when he is present. When one reflects on one's own religious practice to ascertain whether one is a genuine believer, one is not reflecting on the motions one goes through but on how one experiences those rituals. These are not really cases of cognitive reflection as Larmore defines it. Phenomenological reflection is inherently first-personal. Since it is reflection on the way the world appears in experience, only the subject of that experience can reflect on it in this way. Only you have direct access to the way the world seems to you.

Although phenomenological reflection is required for understanding one's existing commitments, Sartre does not hold that all phenomenological reflection is conducive to authenticity. He divides such reflection into two categories, 'pure reflection' and 'impure reflection'. Pure reflection preserves the sense of oneself as a normative being

whose identity is conferred by commitments one undertakes and that one can revoke. Impure reflection, on the other hand, denies this. Sartre does not make this account of the difference between pure and impure reflection very clear in *Being and Nothingness*. The terminology in which he describes it is generally ambiguous. Larmore's distinction between cognitive reflection and practical reflection is inspired by a reading of it. 'Pure reflection, according to *Being and Nothingness*, "delivers the reflected-on [i.e. ourselves] to us, not as a given [i.e. an object of knowledge] but as the being which we have to be"', writes Larmore, quoting Sartre and adding the notes in brackets (2011: 151). This is the basis for Larmore's idea of 'practical reflection', in which one features as the person undertaking the commitment, in contrast to 'cognitive reflection' in which one is an object of knowledge.

Rather than taking the phrase 'the reflected-on' to refer to oneself, however, we should take it to refer to the experience that is the object of phenomenological reflection. For example, if I think about an absent friend and then reflect on that experience, the 'reflected-on' is my experience of thinking about that absent friend. Moreover, rather than take the term 'given' in an epistemic sense, to denote an object of knowledge, we should understand it here in a metaphysical or ontological sense, to denote something beyond our control.

Read in this way, the passage quoted by Larmore claims that pure and impure reflection differ not in what they present, which in both cases is the way the world appears, but in how they present it. Pure reflection presents it, correctly, as a manifestation of my commitments. Impure reflection presents it as just a given. From impure reflection, one could infer that the way the world seems is the way the world is, or that the way the world seems is a result of unchangeable facts about oneself. Impure reflection thus supports inauthenticity, since it allows one to live as though the evaluative and affective texture of the world is not the result of one's commitments. Pure reflection supports authenticity, since it delivers knowledge of that texture as

resulting from one's commitments.

Authenticity and Bad Faith

Understood in this way, authenticity does not essentially require resisting social pressure. Neither does it essentially require viewing oneself and the world from one's own perspective, rather than taking up the perspective of other people. The difference between authenticity and inauthenticity, that is to say, is not based on the role that other people play in one's life at all. Authenticity is rather the recognition of the particular person that you are. This has two dimensions. One is recognition of what it is to be a person, which is to be a normative being whose identity is conferred by their commitments. The other is recognition of the particular commitments that one has, as these are manifested in the way the world seems in experience. Once we understand Sartre's conception of authenticity in this way, we can see that the two criticisms that Larmore raises against it are misplaced.

One of Larmore's criticisms is that Sartre is wrong to identify inauthenticity with bad faith. Cognitive reflection, he argues, is a form of inauthenticity that does not in itself involve bad faith. One is taking up an external perspective, so one is not wholly identified with oneself, but one can be perfectly well aware that one is doing so. However, on Sartre's account inauthenticity does not consist in taking up an external perspective, so cognitive reflection is not in itself an instance of inauthenticity. The identification of inauthenticity with bad faith is therefore consistent with the claim that cognitive reflection is not a form of bad faith. Larmore's other criticism fails for essentially the same reason. This is the criticism that authenticity cannot be the fundamental virtue, since one cannot live well, indeed one cannot engage in authentic practical reflection, without engaging in cognitive reflection. Since cognitive reflection is not an instance of inauthenticity, on Sartre's view, the role of cognitive reflection in

living well does not entail that inauthenticity can be a good thing.

Authenticity and inauthenticity, according to Sartre, concern how one understands oneself to be. One kind of inauthenticity involves affirming one's traits as though they were fixed. Sartre calls this 'sincerity', illustrating it with his character 'the champion of sincerity', who encourages his friend to embrace his homosexual desires. The other kind involves denying one's actual traits and pretending to have contrary traits that explain one's behaviour. This is what the champion of sincerity's friend does when he denies his homosexuality. Sartre calls this kind 'bad faith', but he also holds that this and sincerity are both forms of bad faith in a larger sense (B&N: 89-90).

Bad faith in this larger sense is asserting a claim about oneself despite being aware, to some extent, that this claim is not true. According to Sartre, the champion of sincerity is aware that desires are the result of commitments just as his friend is aware of his homosexuality (B&N: 87-88). Larmore's examples of inauthentic practical reflection are indeed both cases of inauthenticity on this account, but not for the reason Larmore gives. Undertaking a commitment on the pretext that duty requires one to do so is a denial that the values one finds in the world are only a function of one's existing commitments. Endorsing an affair as following the path of one's heroines is pretending that this outcome is determined by traits one shares with those heroines.

<center>The Ethics of Authenticity</center>

Larmore presents one further reason to reject Sartre's claim that authenticity is the fundamental virtue that underpins the rest of ethics. This is a general scepticism about such monistic approaches to ethical value. With respect to authenticity, the objection is 'that in certain circumstances the pursuit of authenticity can lead to undesirable consequences' (2011: 6). More dramatically, is it not possible to be perfectly authentic and thoroughly evil? If authenticity is understood in the way that Larmore describes it,

then this certainly is possible. For if authenticity is just coinciding with oneself in a way that does not deny one's status as a normative being, then this sets no constraints at all on the effects one's actions can have on other people. Understood in this way, that is to say, authenticity is an entirely self-regarding virtue. Larmore does not see this as a reason to reject the idea that authenticity is valuable. His recommendation is rather that we abandon any attempt to cast it as the supreme value, and admit instead that its role is tempered by other values.

Sartre's attempt to cast authenticity as the supreme value need not face this problem. This is because Sartre does not think of authenticity as coinciding with oneself. It is possible, therefore, that authenticity can set constraints on one's attitudes towards others as well as towards oneself. If authenticity can be shown to require the recognition that people in general are normative beings with ongoing commitments, that is to say, then this might be argued to set important constraints on the ways in which one treats people in general. It seems clear from *Existentialism Is A Humanism*, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, and *Notebooks for an Ethics* that this is the direction in which Sartre wanted his ethical theory to develop. But if it is to be developed in this way, there are two immediate problems that need to be solved.

One problem stems from Sartre's account of values as rooted in the commitments one has already undertaken. This is integral to his idea of authenticity, since authenticity requires recognising the values to which one's existing commitments give rise. How is this compatible with the claim that authenticity is objectively valuable, something to which all people ought to aspire irrespective of their existing commitments? The answer to that metaethical question needs to lead either directly or indirectly to a form of authenticity that concerns other people as well as oneself. If one argues, for example, that inauthenticity necessarily frustrates one's own projects, then this could directly support only a self-regarding form of authenticity. An argument from here to the need to recognise other people as the particular normative beings that they are would still

need to be provided. Herein lies the second problem, one parallel to Larmore's concern about authentic evildoers. For it is not at all clear why merely recognising that somebody is a normative being with a particular set of commitments should require one to treat that person with any respect or concern for their wellbeing. It might constrain the ways in which one can successfully oppress people, for example, but it is not at all obvious that it should preclude oppressing them.

These are the problems with the ethics of authenticity that Sartre was grappling with in the years following the publication of *Being and Nothingness*. That he never published his promised work on ethics could be taken to indicate that he could not resolve them. Alternatively, it could be taken to indicate an endorsement of the ethical writings of Simone de Beauvoir that build on this conception of authenticity. Either way, it remains an open question whether an account of authenticity of roughly the shape drawn by Sartre could provide the basis of ethics. If such an account of authenticity could not answer this perennial foundational question, moreover, it does not follow that it could not make other substantial contributions to ethical theory.

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