

A CRITIQUE OF AUTHENTICITY

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Central to the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre is the call to be authentic. (1) They say

‘Examine your life; don't you fool people, mislead them, hide yourself, live a lie? Don't you fool yourself, pretend you are being altruistic, cover up your motives, hide from your own guilt? Of course you do - because everyone does. This is a basic fact about the human condition which can only be overcome by a struggle, by painful, ruthless, soul-searching self-appraisal. We know when we are being inauthentic, even though we don't admit it to ourselves, even though we try not to notice it. And the fact that we do know this when we are forced to attend to it, is the best evidence there could be that we all have the possibility of being authentic. Our normal inauthenticity and the ever-present (if suppressed) awareness that we could be authentic, are a fundamental structure of human being everywhere and for all time. Human beings are always self-aware: authentic/inauthentic expresses the mode of this self-relation. To grasp my true self is to be authentic; to hide my true self is to be inauthentic. In a derivative sense I may be authentic or inauthentic in relation to another person. Being authentic in a relationship is when I reveal my self openly and honestly both to myself and the other. Conversely, being inauthentic is hiding myself both from myself and from the other. Admit these things, and strive to be authentic!’

The core of Heidegger's Being and Time is the elaboration of this a priori structure of human existence in terms of its other structures - temporality, spatiality etc. The obsessive theme of Sartre's Being and Nothingness is the struggle with myself against inauthenticity: the struggle to claim my birthright of freedom and independence against the tempting surrender to easy inauthenticity. Prometheans of the human condition, Heidegger and Sartre stand forth as heroes of our time: like Old-Testament prophets recalling us from sin and blindness to the way of truth (2); making philosophy into what it should be - a way of life, Pity, perhaps, but it doesn't work.

The argument is plausible, appealing, but pernicious in its effects. They point to a type of experience with which we are all familiar and about which we have ambiguous feelings. They then say this is the most significant range of experience and cite as evidence the fact that it can be used to unbalance us. Playing upon remembered fears or adolescent anxieties they drive us back out of the world into navel-gazing, saying 'How can you hope to understand the rest of being if you haven't come to terms with your own?'. But because they have already retreated, their articulation of this range of experience is misleading and ultimately false. And while they seem to be clarifying and explaining they are distorting and obscuring. The inevitable conclusion is that authenticity is a chimera. They have set it up in such a way that it is in practice totally unattainable. But by that time their commitment to it is so great that they must still exhort us

to strive after what they know we cannot reach. So Heidegger goes chasing he knows not what ('Let's call it Being'), while the more realistic Sartre ends in despair.

The Fallacy

The fallacy of this self-defeating argument lies in the suppressed claim that the key to our existence, the centre of our being, lies in our reflective relationship to ourselves. Neither Sartre nor Heidegger thinks that we create our own being - we simply find ourselves in it and must make of it what we can: they even coin a term to refer to this otherness of my being - facticity. And because both of them (irrespective of occasional disclaimers) are searching for a prior, eternal truth (3) they feel no need to remember how the self-reflective individual developed into the sophisticated being he is. They invite us to jump into our adult being as if that being were not intrinsically dependent on our development from children. 'I, and I alone, am responsible for my being' says Sartre. If this were intended as a principle of morality we could take it for the rhetoric it is. But it is intended to include a descriptive truth about how I came to be as I am; and as such it is simply false. I am as I am not simply because of how I have thought myself to be, nor even because of how I have made myself (4). My being is not essentially self-reflection, nor even activity with respect to myself. My history is a history of action and interaction with others; I could not be as I am now without this formative interaction with other people.

The historicity of individual human beings is something Heidegger and Sartre take no proper account of (5). They forget that we were all babies once. Though they dwell upon the fact that we are going to die, they lightly dismiss the fact that we were born, were sucking infants, toddlers, children, adolescents. How we are now is not merely how we conceive ourselves to be. It is how we have been made by ourselves and by others - for without others we would not even have the language with which to articulate our self-conception.

We are essentially social beings. As a matter of fact each and every one of us knows that it was others who taught us to speak, to question, and to philosophise. Pace Sartre our autonomy is founded upon others: it was other people who taught me to rely on myself. I learned to articulate my experience. I learned to think about myself. The self-awareness that I have was not with me at birth - it was learned from other people. I was born into a pre-existent historical and social context. I inherited a language and a culture, each at a particular stage of its development. As I learned and began to appropriate for myself the language, cultural traditions etc, I began to act upon them, i.e. to contribute to their history and to change or maintain them.

3 While Sartre rejects the traditional notion of a human essence, in B&N he clearly believes that there is a general 'human condition' in which everyone finds himself irrespective of place or time. Heidegger's whole work is devoted to the revelation of a truth not only a priori and eternal, but ineffable.

4 Sartre's Cartesianism is well known, but cf. Heidegger's B&T, p68.

5 They both stress (private) temporality at the expense of (public) historicity. In trying to derive the latter from the former Heidegger gets completely confused, see B&T, p433ff.

1 In this article I am referring primarily to the Heidegger of Being and Time (B&T), Oxford, 1967, and the Sartre of Being and Nothingness (B&N), London, 1969.

2 cf. Heidegger, What is Philosophy? Twayne, 1959.



I enter into a take and give relationship-dialectic, if you prefer (6)-with 'objective' historical conditions. In my dealings with other people I confirm or challenge, for example, traditional moral rules, or usages of words. The significance of my acts is never arbitrary, and it never depends solely on me. If I am able to appropriate my acts, take possession of their significance in a fully self-conscious way, it is because I can assess their objective meaning. And the objective meaning is something I have learned in my earlier dealings with others.

Authenticity of Relationships

For Heidegger and Sartre the subjective meaning precedes the objective, the private goes before the public. So long as their discussions are confined to isolated acts or encounters, this position is tenable. But it becomes totally untenable when the individual is seen as having a personal history which did not begin at the same time as the history of the world.

The primacy of the subjective over the objective is something they extend into their accounts of (in-)authenticity in relationships. Heidegger gives no concrete examples, but does allow that relationships may be authentic (7). He seems to be thinking of profound friendships, or deep relations of a dependent kind - such as a master/pupil, or parent/child relationship. In any case what makes the relationship authentic is that it provides the context for one or other person (he does not stipulate both) to be open and honest about him/herself. In fact, it is not so much that the relationship is authentic as that the person is authentic in the relationship. Heidegger does not show that any reciprocity need be involved: the same relationship could apparently be authentic for me but inauthentic for you.

In a similar way Sartre dissects relationships into contingent encounters between self-absorbed individuals: except that for him relationships are absolute disjunctions. Almost by definition it is impossible for a relationship to be authentic: it is characteristically the context of my own self-deception. He takes a concrete example in which a man is trying to seduce a woman (8). They are **having an intellectual conversation; he puts his hand**

over hers. It is a sexual advance but ambiguous: she can interpret it as an asexual gesture if she wishes. She does so wish and pretends to herself that the man is wholly absorbed in their platonic relationship. She is being inauthentic in that at one level (the physical) she is quite aware that he is making an advance; she is actually enjoying being desired. But she 'detaches' herself from her body, regards it as not-her, so at another level she can interpret what is happening purely as a meeting of minds.

According to Sartre the girl is guilty of 'bad faith'. She is being inauthentic in that she is fooling herself: this inauthenticity is a self-reflexive relationship. Of course the girl is fooling herself, but she is doing so in terms of the relationship. Just as we learn language in the context of relationships so we learn inauthenticity in relationships - as a way of coping with them. The key to understanding the strategy the girl is employing lies back in her personal history. It is only when he detaches it from this history that Sartre can present it as evidence of some universal metaphysical desire to become thing-like (en-soi).

“The little girl is in mummy's bedroom. Spilling out of the open box on the dressing table are sparkling necklaces, bracelets, brooches. If mummy weren't here the little hands would be delving into the treasure, holding up, trying on. But mummy doesn't let her and mummy is here, sitting at the dressing table. Nevertheless the jewels do so want to be touched. So while she is talking to mummy, and even distracting her by saying what nice hair she has, the little hands stray "absent-mindedly" to the box. When mummy objects she will say, "Oh, I wasn't thinking", so mummy can't be too cross.”

It is in instances like this that inauthenticity is learned. It is a perfectly sensible strategy for doing what one is not allowed to do. It develops into a way of doing what is wrong, what one feels guilty about or afraid of doing. What starts off as an excuse for other people becomes an excuse for oneself as the moral prohibitions of conscience are internalised. So when Heidegger 'deduces' the possibility of having a conscience from the fundamental possibility of being authentic (9) he is reversing the order of events in personal history. My explicit adult reflection upon self and the truth of its expression can only arise because I learned to tell lies at the same time as I learned to tell the truth. The ability to raise the question of authenticity can only arise because of prior interactive learning of how to relate to others.

Role Playing

Essentially the same as the inauthenticity of the woman resisting sexual advances is the inauthenticity involved in playing a part. Observe the waiter, says Sartre (10), see how he carries himself, moves between the tables, bends over customers etc: all his movements are a little too precise, too exaggerated. They reveal that he is deliberately playing a role: he is trying to be a waiter - the 'perfect' waiter. This, Sartre concludes, is not merely false but inauthentic, because of the way in which the man is relating to himself. Like the woman being seduced he is trying to make himself thing-like (into a being-in-itself, in Sartre's terminology). That is, he is trying to suppress his

6 cf. Merleau-Ponty. *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p442ff.

7 B&T, pp158-9.

8 B&N, pp55-6.

9 B&T, p313.

10 B&N, p59.

essential freedom and become like an object with properties: the perfect waiter does this, the perfect waiter does that...

Inauthenticity of this kind, playing a part, putting up a front, might at first sight seem more like a straight case of self-relationship, with no essential involvement of others. After all I can rehearse my part alone, in front of the mirror (11). If I am a secret transvestite I might altogether avoid the company of others when I play my part. But of course the whole significance of role-playing derives from it being essentially a way of presenting myself to others. And even when I am rehearsing, or secretly performing, its significance still derives from its being a pretended relating to others. It is of course a highly sophisticated activity, one which has to be learned and one which forms an essential element in the games of even very small children. Pretending to be someone else, to be Daddy, or a doctor or a cowboy, is a way of exploring and coming to understand both how other people are, and how one can be oneself. There is no necessary dishonesty, no necessary fooling of oneself or others in the activity of playing a part. As Sartre admits, the waiter may be putting on airs out of sheer boredom, or may be playing games with his customers.

But though role-playing is not inevitably inauthentic in the way that Sartre claims, it clearly can be. When I present myself deliberately as something I am not with the intention of deceiving someone else, this is obviously inauthentic. And if I so create a part for myself that I always live in it, detached from my own spontaneity, I have become habitually inauthentic. What neither of these cases reveal is any metaphysical tendency to regard myself as an object, as Sartre would have (12). Nor do they establish that when I do play a role it is essentially a mode of relating to myself. On the contrary, playing a role is essentially a mode of relating to others. If I can fool myself into believing in the role I am playing this is only because I know what it is to present myself to another, I am thinking myself into his position. In this sense role-playing is doubly dependent on my relationship to others.

How to avoid Bad Faith

The implication of both Heidegger's and Sartre's accounts is that becoming authentic is largely a matter of getting my head straight about myself. For Heidegger I must escape the idle chatter of the crowd and resolutely face the significance of the fact that I will die (13). My anxiety in the face of my coming death will have the positive effect of pulling me back to the truth about myself. I will then resolutely decide to be authentic in future.

If Heidegger talks in abstracts - or at best the pseudo-concrete (14) - Sartre at least has the merit of working out the implications in terms of real life histories. Biography is Sartre's alternative to Freudian style psycho-analysis. His 'biography' of Genet is that of an existentialist hero. Genet was forced by society into inauthenticity: into playing the role of a homosexual criminal. Genet's heroism is that of Mephistopheles - his history is a super-human struggle to become authentically evil: he falls because there can be no such thing. When

11 cf. Sartre's *Nausea*, Penguin, 1965, p30. It is significant that the 'hero' of this early novel has no living relationship to others: he relates only to himself and to things.

12 Sartre's whole use of 'self-objectivation' is founded on a very loose metaphor. Not even the most 'mechanical' of schizophrenics really regards himself as an object or even supposes he can actually become one.

13 B&T, pp219-24 and 350ff.

14 cf. 'On the pseudo-concreteness of Heidegger's philosophy', G. Anders Stern, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8, 1947-8, pp337-70.

Genet realises this, and when he realises, crucially that he has been striving to become thing-like (which is impossible), he can relax into authentic spontaneity. Sartre recognises, of course, that the return to an open exhibition of spontaneous inclinations may not meet with social approval. It is an interesting question whether I can authentically be a racist, or commit murder: Sartre tries hard to show that I cannot, and that racism at least is essentially inauthentic (15).

In the last analysis Sartre needs to invoke a moral imperative - the universalising principle that when I act I act for all: my every deed is legislation by example (16). This pathetic failure on Sartre's part, this collapse back into moralising, is the direct result of making authenticity essentially a relationship to self. From the fact that I am being honest with myself absolutely nothing follows about the way in which I will relate to others. There is no way that Sartre can show that an authentic relationship to myself produces authentic relations to others. In fact it may have the reverse effect of making me better able to dissimulate and deceive other people. Thus Sartre could derive no existentialist ethics from the ontology of Being and Nothingness (17). There are no authentic acts per se. In fact his authenticity has no implications for action because it is not a question of acts but of attitudes. Providing I have the right attitude towards it (i.e. complete awareness of exactly what I am doing and that I am doing it freely), any act can be authentic.

'Normal Authenticity'

This gross distortion of our capacity for authentic relationships follows from the misrepresentation of individual being as essentially asocial. Our normal dealings with others are not made up of elaborate stratagems of deceit, or intricate webs of lies. As children we are innocently frank before we learn when to be otherwise, and even at that age we are aware of the need to have our honestly described experience confirmed by others. Such openness is the basic ingredient of the universal human experiences of friendship and love. We not only strive after but often attain the satisfaction of authentic relations with others.

Heidegger and Sartre however elevate authenticity into an ideal which is virtually unattainable - an almost mystical coincidence with self. It is really something everyday, even commonplace. I reveal myself to others in my acts; I do so knowingly and honestly. I cannot help but reveal myself in some way. To be inauthentic is to foster mistaken interpretations - which is possible only against the normality of unmistakable interpretations. It is only because of this knowledge that I am revealing myself to others that I can conceive of deceiving them, of pretending to be what I am not. To use Sartre's terminology, my Being-for-self (pour-soi) is founded upon my Being-for-others (pour-autrui), and not the other way round (18). When I come to think of myself I do so with the linguistic apparatus which I have learned, and with the knowledge of what my parents and other teachers have told me about myself (whether deliberately or otherwise). If this thinking matches the way I feel, it is adequate for me. If I feel differently from what I have been told about myself, I may be able to revise what

15 in: *Portrait of an anti-Semite*, *Childhood of a Boss*, *The Respectable Prostitute* etc.

16 B&N, p533ff.

17 As he intended. See B&N, p628

18 Paradoxically, both Sartre and Heidegger concede this when they recognise the normal 'falling' (B&T, p219), or 'bad faith' (B&N, p47ff) of my being.

I have been told by articulating the way I feel: in this case I have the maturity to create myself progressively. But if I am not able to revise my self-image, if the gap between belief and feeling is unbridgeable, or if I attempt to bridge it by accommodating my feelings to the belief, the result is a serious, damaging, inauthenticity.

The point is this: my self-conception is always a matching between feeling and belief (19) - feeling which is immediate or remembered self-experience, and belief which is derived initially from what I am told by others (20). When I act I am of course aware of what I am doing: but how that act is to be conceptualised or interpreted is not initially known to me. As a child I have to be taught it. Once I have learned what that act means, what it reveals to others about me or about my intentions, then and only then am I able to use it to dissimulate. That is, I perform it not because I want to, but because I want others to believe certain things about me. Once I realise I can do that, then I can perform the act in order to be able to believe certain things about myself. So I give money to the beggar not because I have any sympathy for the lout, nor even because anyone might be watching, but because I want to be able to think of myself as generous. The inauthenticity arises here: I don't feel generous, even though the public meaning of what I have just done is that I am generous.

The inauthenticity with which Sartre and Heidegger are so concerned is essentially this: the awareness of a gap between feeling and thought (21) - how I think I am as against how I feel myself to be. These are, if you like, the subjective and the objective aspects of my being, the for-itself and the for-others - except that both these pairs of terms mislead us. If I act on stage I am inauthentic; I do not express what I feel, but I choose my actions for the meaning which they will convey. If I play a role off the stage, I am inauthentic in that I choose meanings which I try to embody in my acts. In either of these cases I may or may not intend to deceive by my inauthenticity. What is clear is that these are deliberate acts of communication to others: I am intending to convey meanings, which, as it happens, do not express what I actually feel. It is worth remembering that such inauthenticity may be praiseworthy or even heroic on occasion: the sufferer from an incurable disease who conceals his pain so as not to distress his relatives, for example (22).

The derivative case of inauthenticity, interesting by its abnormality and perversity, is that where I address the communication to myself. In this instance, and only in this instance, is inauthenticity a self-reflexive relationship. The perversity lies in the fact that by my acts I hope to convince myself that I feel what I do not in fact feel (or that I do not feel what I do). The abnormality lies in that this is not my normal way of acting upon my feelings: normally I do not try to deceive myself about what I feel. If I were to, then I would rightly be called psychologically abnormal.

In short, it is because I am essentially a social being, a being-for-others, that I am able to conceive of my self as expressed through or concealed by my actions. It is this conceptualisation and my learning of the accepted meanings of certain acts which enables me to dissimulate, to play a part for

19 Which fact forms the basis for Sartre's theorization of Being-for-self (direct feeling) and Being-for-others (articulated beliefs).

20 cf. R. D. Laing, *Self and Others*, Tavistock, 1961, p86ff.

21 cf. the early definition of schizophrenia as a splitting between affect and cognition, e.g. Mayer Gross, Slater & Roth, *Clinical Psychiatry* 3rd edition, London, 1969, p264.

22 Or Pagliacci, of course.

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others (with or without the intention of deceiving them). And it is because I know the meanings which others will take from my acts that I can perform them for my own benefit alone i.e. engage in the classic type of self-deception.

The Individualism of Phenomenology

It is the extreme individualism of Heidegger and Sartre which causes them to deal with inauthenticity in the way they do. It is part of Husserl's legacy. When he founded phenomenology he saw it as a re-assertion of the subject, of the individual human knower who had been suppressed in traditional accounts of knowledge. His suspension of received beliefs and appeal to the phenomena of experience was effectively a critique of the 'objective', the socially received, based on my own individuality: his search was for the 'pure' phenomenon, immediated by society, history or culture: his aim - to uncover the true essences of the universal ideas which are contained in the human reason. The only place which society could have in his scheme of things was as the series (23) of individual human egos: his only possible account of history was as the spontaneous movement of the spirit of European culture (24).

Heidegger's individualism was both more complex and more subtle. He was too steeped in the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation to suppose that there could be any easy immediated access to 'pure' phenomena. Yet like Husserl, the injunction which informs all his thinking is to let things appear as they really are, in spite of the interference caused by other people and society at large. Heidegger knows it is difficult to get society off his back, but he makes a determined effort to do it. Our language is corrupt, he says; words mislead us, society distracts us, the history of thought is a decline from its apogee under the Greeks. The great thinkers are those who stand out against the corrup-

23 cf. Sartre on the series, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p256.

24 See *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, p191.

tion of society and culture, alone, in anguish, but with supreme fortitude.

The Sartre of Being and Nothingness builds society into the ontological structure of the individual as an ineradicable but utterly alien intrusion. The other, society, is that which limits my natural absolute freedom. I am inescapably a Being-for-others, an object; and that aspect of my Being is not mine. I can neither escape it nor capture it: it is what makes me vulnerable, the potential victim of another subjectivity. I am both a subject and an object, but only my subjectivity is freedom: my objectivity is unfreedom, the vehicle of inauthenticity, the interference of society with my autonomy and my integrity.

The effect of this acute individualism is to dismiss the social as necessarily injurious to the individual. Problems which 'appear' to be social and about relations are relocated either within the individual, or at the unbridgeable abyss between self and others. 'There is nothing I can do', says Sartre, 'to prevent my relationships becoming forms of sado-masochism: that is the way all human beings necessarily are.' (25) So these 'apparently' social problems either admit of no solution, or the solution is to be sought within the individual. It is in this sense that Heidegger and Sartre are navel-gazing, and it is because of this that their doctrines can have pernicious effects.

The Location of Solutions in Society

The phenomena which Heidegger and Sartre use to construct their accounts of inauthenticity are essentially out there in the social world. Their locus is my dealings with others. What I understand about myself is inferred from the way in which I relate to other people. Authenticity in relationships is therefore both the basis for, and the meaning of, authenticity to self. If Heidegger and Sartre think that I can deal with inauthenticity simply by modifying my attitude towards myself, they are absolutely wrong. Heidegger's exhortations to be resolute, look forward to death with fortitude etc, are not mere verbiage; they are pernicious doctrine, because they actually prevent us recognising where the locus of effective action lies. And Sartre's utter pessimism effectively constitutes advice not to bother trying. The effect of both is either paralysis or utterly ineffective musings. The only way to deal with inauthenticity is where it occurs - in and through relationships. And despite Heidegger and Sartre, relationships are not accidental collisions between naturally isolated individuals.

The question which is left by the critique of authenticity is whether there is any wider significance to what otherwise appears as the self-indulgent reflections of lonely bourgeois intellectuals. Obviously Heidegger and Sartre write their own hang-ups (about death, isolation etc) into their pronouncements about the eternal condition of man. The appeal of their writings is another matter. They seem to have articulated and so raised to the level of consciousness an aspect of alienation typical of contemporary capitalism. A more adequate articulation would need to locate these problems of the individual within a general theory of alienation.

25 B&N, p364ff.

