

# Autonomy and the Question of Authenticity

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# Contents

1. The Task . . . . .	3
2. The Standard Account of Authenticity . . . . .	4
3. Problems with the Standard Account . . . . .	6
4. Authenticity as Self-Fulfillment . . . . .	12
5. Authenticity as Acknowledgment . . . . .	14
Conclusion . . . . .	18

# 1. The Task

The task of this paper is to distinguish conceptions of authenticity in an effort to find out which, if any, can be of service to a plausible theory of autonomous agency. In doing this I will go back several decades to look at an account of authenticity offered by Karl Jaspers, and to yet a different ideal of authenticity attributed by Charles Taylor to Johann Herder. My suspicion is that the view of authenticity that has come to dominate current discussion grows out of the Herderian ideal. According to this ideal, a person lives authentically when she is true to herself, and she is true to herself when she develops her life on the basis of what is of value to her.<sup>1</sup> The currently received view borrows from this idea and maintains that authenticity amounts to endorsement of, or absence of alienation from, the principles according to which one lives one's life.

As I understand the concept, to be autonomous is to act within a framework of rules one sets for oneself, and it is to have a kind of authority over oneself as well as the power to act on that authority. A theory of autonomy must explain what kind of authority and power is involved, given that we are speaking of adult persons who are interpersonally bound by political and moral frameworks. We correctly attribute autonomy to a person when the person has de facto power and authority to direct affairs of elemental importance to her life within a framework of rules (or values, principles, beliefs, pro-attitudes) that she has set for herself. These affairs are general and routine. They concern, for instance, intimate relationships, access to and control over information about oneself, and events that lend a distinctive pattern to one's life. While a person's behavior and motivations can be traced to a variety of factors, to describe a person as autonomous is to claim that the person is selfdirected in this way.

Elsewhere I have suggested that authenticity is unnecessary for autonomy. I agree that autonomous people must be true to themselves, but deny that they are true to themselves when their lives are directed according to belief, desire, and valuational states that they would accept unreservedly were the occasion to consider their content and foundation to arise, as the ideal of authenticity described above contends. I have argued that our motives may spring from attachments, ideals, or traits of character that are indelibly inscribed on our personality but that we do not endorse as such, and that this does not undercut our autonomy.<sup>2</sup> In the following section, I will briefly revisit the argument. I think the argument stands. But I think, too, that it is incomplete. It is incomplete because it only addressed one interpretation of authenticity, one that Harry Frankfurt develops and one that is taken up by what has been called the "procedural authenticity" approach to personal autonomy. I think this interpretation has less to do with autonomy than we might think. However, there is a conception of

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<sup>1</sup> See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Marina A.L. Oshana, "Autonomy and Self-Identity," in John Christman and Joel Anderson (eds.), *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 77–97.

authenticity that borrows from Jaspers—one we might call an epistemic conception—that is important for autonomy although it, too, is not so constitutive of autonomy as to make it impossible to be inauthentic in this sense and yet autonomous. I hope to show that a person who is autonomous is disposed to acknowledge—to face up to—the features of her character and her history that anchor her identity, even those features from which she is estranged, but that acknowledgment is a “Jasperian” form of authenticity quite different from endorsement or absence of estrangement. A person can be autonomous even while she does not reflectively endorse key aspects of her identity.

In considering what authenticity amounts to I will consider two cases. The first is that presented by the situation in which David Kaczynski, younger brother of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, found himself before he assisted in the apprehension of his only sibling. The second case is that of the acclaimed German novelist Günter Grass. In August 2006, at the age of 78 and in advance of the publication of his autobiography *Peeling the Onion*, Grass disclosed that at the age of seventeen, he had been conscripted as a *Flakhelfer*<sup>3</sup> in the Wassen SS during the Second World War. His service transpired after he had volunteered for and was rejected for submarine duty at the age of fifteen. What made Grass’s admission so disconcerting was that he had spent the greater part of his life in the public eye as the critical moral and political conscience of post-war Germany. Having devoted half a century to reminding us of the great corruptibility of human nature, “the coexistence of mendacity and the greatness and ... the infinitely complex nature of guilt,”<sup>4</sup> Grass now stands vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. Joachim Fest, the recently deceased German journalist and biographer of Adolf Hitler, told the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel* that “[a]fter 60 years, this confession comes a bit too late. I can’t understand how someone who for decades set himself up as a moral authority, a rather smug one, could pull this off.”<sup>5</sup>

Let us keep the cases of Kaczynski and Grass in mind as we turn to consider what authenticity might amount to, and how authenticity or its lack might figure in their lives.

## 2. The Standard Account of Authenticity

The term “authenticity” has been used with such frequency and such confidence in discussing the autonomy of persons that few have stopped to enquire exactly what is meant by the term. A number of philosophers have argued that autonomy is attributed to persons largely in virtue of the authenticity of the person’s cognitive and psychological states, character, and choices. In ascribing autonomy to individuals, discussants

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<sup>3</sup> *Flakhelfer* or *Luftwaffenhelfer* (airforce helper) refers to German male students born between 1926 and 1929 who were deployed to support the anti-aircraft war effort.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Kehlmann, “A Prisoner of the Nobel,” *New York Times* Op-Ed, Sunday, August 20, 2006, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> [www.iht.com](http://www.iht.com) *International Herald Tribune*, August 13, 2006, accessed September 13, 2006.

assume that the individual is capable of unimpeded critical self-reflection. The idea is that a person's cognitive, affective, valuational, and dispositional states, as well as personal commitments, social roles, and ideals are authentic if the person would "wholeheartedly identify" with them or would embrace them without reservation were she to critically reflect upon their content and origin.<sup>6</sup> An agent's actions are regarded as autonomous because they are authentic expressions of her will (or expressions of her authentic will—the details are rather fuzzy) and they express what is most meaningful to the agent and most evocative of her deeply held concerns.

The devil is in the details, and assorted definitions of "authenticity" supply these details in distinct but overlapping ways. Gerald Dworkin, in some of the earlier writings on autonomy that have spawned current debate, made authenticity a cornerstone of his theory. He characterized it as the requirement of autonomy manifest when persons exercise their reflective and revisionary capacities—capacities that enable a person "to raise the question whether I will identify with or reject the reasons for which I now act."<sup>7</sup> Being authentic means that "persons define their nature, and take responsibility for the kind of person they are."<sup>8</sup> This seems wrong to me: a person can "define her nature" and "take responsibility for the kind of person she is" while failing to identify with the reasons that motivate her to act. For example, I might regret, or feel largely uncomfortable with, the fact that I am peevish and short-tempered, while conceding that I am largely responsible for these defining characteristics and while acknowledging that, too often, they spur me to act. Let us put this thought forward for consideration, and revisit it shortly.

The account of authenticity I shall focus on for critical purposes can be traced to Harry Frankfurt. I will call this the "standard account" to reflect the central place it occupies in current discussion. While he does not usually employ the term "authenticity," preferring to speak of "identification" or "satisfaction," Frankfurt states that "[a] person acts autonomously only when his volitions derive from the essential character of his will"<sup>9</sup> and then proceeds to locate a person's essential character in what is authenticated as "volitionally necessary." Volitional necessity constrains a person by rendering her incapable of making certain choices and rejecting others, thus setting the boundaries of the will, without which Frankfurt believes autonomy "cannot find a grip."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, because the kind of constraint upon the person's will originates from within the person—it is not externally, and thus heteronomously, imposed—volitional

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of wholeheartedness is developed by Harry Frankfurt in "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 159–76. A discussion of the authenticity condition is found in Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, "Autonomy, Necessity, and Love," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 129–41, at p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, "Rationality and the Unthinkable," in *The Importance of What We Care About*, pp. 177–90, at p. 178.

necessity is an expression of a person's authenticity. "Autonomy," Frankfurt informs us, "is essentially a matter of whether we are active rather than passive in our motives and choices—whether, however we acquire them, they are the motives and choices that we really want and are therefore in no way alien to us."<sup>11</sup>

I am not going to try to make sense of the details of Frankfurt's account. Much of it strikes me as under-explained, but the account has generated a wealth of scholarship that endeavors to clarify the account. I simply want to note that Frankfurt's account is at the center of discussion. Other philosophers, inspired by what has become known as the Dworkin-Frankfurt analysis, describe authenticity in similar terms, even where they depart from the details of the original model. Some philosophers who construe autonomy as requiring authenticity focus their attention on the quality of procedural practices or "competencies" exhibited by the agent. Diana Meyers, for example, holds that autonomy depends on whether a person possesses and successfully uses a "repertory of coordinated skills that make up autonomy competency" coupled with "the collocation of attributes that emerges as a person successfully exercises autonomy competency."<sup>12</sup> The emphasis remains on autonomy as requiring authenticity of self, but authenticity is described in quite broad terms: Authenticity is in evidence when "action spring[s] from the depths of the individual's being"; when the agent "does what makes sense in terms of his or her own identity"; when the agent is "not so influenced by others that [her] choices seem a committee project"; when she lives in harmony with her convictions and inclinations.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Problems with the Standard Account

I have described in rough strokes what I have called the standard account of authenticity. There are problems with this account, and I want to spend a moment addressing these problems.

One problem is that even if it makes sense to construe authenticity in this fashion, as the expression of a person's essential volitional nature realized through reflection and wholeheartedness, the term has been employed too broadly; it has been applied across categories of phenomena too different in type to be authentic in the same sense. For example, if we are speaking of how we see ourselves, or imagine ourselves, "authenticity" will be a property of the subject's reflexive representations—of what makes up her self-conception or awareness of her identity. David Velleman, who has written extensively on the need to disambiguate various conceptions of the self and the suitability of Frankfurt's ideal of authenticity for this task, contends that

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<sup>11</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 20, n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Diana T. Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[i]n this context ... particular cares and concerns can be definitive of a person's identity or essential to the self. That he has these motives may be a fundamental, organizing principle of a person's self-understanding, without which the rest of his self-image would no longer cohere. If he had to stop thinking of himself as having these motives, he would temporarily lack any coherent conception of himself as a person, and so he might be described as no longer knowing who he was ... The motives are essential to his self, or selfidentity, in the sense that refers to his self-conception, which can be revised or replaced if his actual motives should change.<sup>14</sup>

These seem to be the sort of phenomena Frankfurt has in mind when he speaks of a person's essential or "authentic" nature. But when we speak of autonomy or self-governance, this construction of authenticity strikes me as misapplied. Consider one conception of autonomy (not my own) for which this is true. Suppose, following Velleman, that "autonomous action is behavior motivated in part by ... that part of a person with which you necessarily think about things, [the] mental standpoint [that is] always presenting a reflexive aspect to your thought," by "that part of a person that he is unable to regard non-reflexively, a part on which he cannot attain a truly detached, third-personal perspective." We can claim, following Velleman, that this standpoint will present to the agent what "will essentially be 'self' to him, in the sense that it is inalienably 'me' from his perspective" at the same time as we claim that it will not be necessary for the continuity of his identity as a person. That is, we might agree that "this part of a person can be the locus of his autonomy," in light of the fact that it always denotes a reflexive viewpoint in his thinking, but deny that this necessarily constitutes his identity as a person.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, this is not the same sort of essentiality that authenticity, standardly construed, involves. In describing autonomy as authenticity—as centered in and expressive of a person's ability to reflect on facets of his personality and to experience a distinctive connection to some of them and not others—Frankfurt is not merely referring to the unavoidability of "first-personal thinking—for thinking of something as 'me' or 'mine'."<sup>16</sup> Rather, Frankfurt is referring to certain characteristics or properties of the person whose autonomy is at issue, namely, that he is moved by values, desires, beliefs, and attitudes to which he feels an affinity and with which he is satisfied, having "no interest in bringing about a change in [his] condition (even if a change would be willingly accepted) even if a change would make him better off."<sup>17</sup> If

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<sup>14</sup> J. David Velleman, "Identification and Identity," in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (eds.), *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 91–123, at p. 112. Velleman offers a rather different definition of autonomy as "the center of narrative gravity"—that is, as the autobiographical story persons tell by which they reflexively create themselves—in "The Self as Narrator," in Christman and Anderson (eds.), *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, pp. 56–76, and in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Velleman, "Identification and Identity," pp. 114–15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Frankfurt, "The Faintest Passion," in *Necessity, Volition, and Love*, pp. 95–107, at p. 102.

the agent is satisfied, then the elements that influence the direction of his choices and actions will be crucially the agent's own, and this is enough to make him autonomous. If, on the other hand, the agent feels disaffected and estranged from the source of his choices and actions, then he is not autonomous.

It is my belief that, while being governed by motivational essences that one wholeheartedly embraces might constitute the standard idea of authenticity, being governed by motivational essences has very little to do with autonomy—as Velleman construes it or as I construe it. Let us suppose that the ideas of volitional necessity and authenticity are plausible, and that they are hallmarks of a person's self-conception or selfidentity. Even with these suppositions in place, it remains open to question how the things with which we identify affect our autonomy, and even more so whether they constitute autonomy. Even if we allow that volitional necessity figures importantly in the concept of autonomous agency, we can still ask why volitional necessity relies on endorsement of either an explicit or tacit variety.

Making authenticity as it is ordinarily understood the central property of autonomy spawns a second type of concern, actually a family of concerns that arise when we begin to examine elements of our identity that are central and unsheddable. For one thing, the demand for critical scrutiny can be costly. Subjecting central aspects of one's identity to critical scrutiny might leave one so discombobulated as to have one's capacity for self-direction encumbered, thereby prompting a decline of autonomy. If this occurs, critical scrutiny will result in a diminution rather than a strengthening of autonomy.<sup>18</sup>

Critical scrutiny can itself encumber autonomy, but even where it does not, the practice itself is relatively rare for most human beings. We appear capable of conducting ourselves as autonomous agents despite the fact that our attempts at overt reflection are reserved for moments of crisis. Most authenticity theorists have shied away from calling for actual critical reflection, preferring instead to make the possibility of authenticity—of hypothetical endorsement or absence of alienation—the litmus test for autonomy. Rather than say that we make certain aspects of our personality our own by reflectively endorsing them, we will say that aspects of our personality are authentic as long as we do not experience alienation toward them—as long, that is, as the agent does not or would not feel estranged from her personality were she to examine it in a critical light.<sup>19</sup> But recasting the standard as a hypothetical test will

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<sup>18</sup> The point is that if critical scrutiny is necessary for autonomy, it is so with qualification and in judicious measure. What is necessary for autonomy in judicious measure may not be good for autonomy in excess; critical scrutiny aimed at achieving authenticity may, if unduly probing, enervate autonomy, with the result that it may not be good for autonomy. (Similarly, Gerald Dworkin argues that while choice is needed for autonomy, more choice is not always better for autonomy. See Dworkin, "Is More Choice Better Than Less?" reprinted in *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, pp. 62–81. Analogously, medical treatment or therapy intended to have a regenerative effect upon the body and mind can produce just the sort of decline in health it is intended to combat if applied overzealously or in excess.)

<sup>19</sup> For example, see Charles Taylor, "Responsibility for Self," in Amélie O. Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Also, John Christman, "Procedural Autonomy and Liberal Legitimacy," in James Stacey Taylor (ed.), *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on*

not remove the worry that too much reflection—and just how much is too much?—may actually reveal general disaffectedness with one’s life or circumstances.<sup>20</sup> If the absence of disaffectedness is needed for authenticity and authenticity is the mark of autonomy, autonomy will erode. The demand for authenticity is further complicated if the elements from which a person feels estranged form essential aspects of her character or her identity. In this case, a person will not lack autonomy merely vis-à-vis some characteristic she happens to have, but will fail to be autonomous *simpliciter*, because the characteristics from which she feels alienated and perhaps actively disavows are nonetheless ones she would need to have to be a self-governed party.<sup>21</sup> It is, of course, open to the authenticity theorist to charge that a person can retain her autonomy in cases in which she is alienated from this or that aspect of her selfconception as long as she is authentic with respect to most aspects of her identity. But if this is the case, the authenticity theorist might be relying on an idealized account of autonomy to which few subscribe, most of all philosophers for whom the content neutrality or substantive neutrality of the standard account is a selling point.<sup>22</sup>

The standard view of authenticity is that volitional constraints upon a person’s will are implicated in a person’s autonomy because they survive a counterfactual thought-

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*Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 277–98.

<sup>20</sup> Frankfurt indicates that what provides volitional necessity with the anchoring or terminating stature it has, such that one is no longer free to raise the question, “Is this what I most want to do?” is precisely that volitional necessity does not presuppose the agent’s scrutiny and active endorsement. Authenticity generated by deliberate reflective endorsement is unnecessary in many cases.

<sup>21</sup> What I call “autonomy simpliciter” or “autonomy without qualification” refers to autonomy construed as a global or dispositional phenomenon marking the condition of a person who has de facto power and authority over the direction of her life. By contrast, personal autonomy might be construed in a local, or occurrent, sense as a property of a person’s acts or choices considered individually. This localized construal seems especially apparent in judgments of what is involved in bearing a certain kind of responsibility for choice, as when we say of the thief, “No one made her steal. She acted autonomously; she did it of her own free will.” The difference between the local and global notions is evident in the fact that a person’s global autonomy is not fully determined by facts about how autonomous or nonautonomous the person is vis-à-vis particular choices. Autonomy simpliciter is not necessarily increased by an increasing sum of episodes of self-governance, for the latter might concern only a very narrow range of matters, or they might concern matters of little consequence to a person. Moreover, a person’s local autonomy might not be due to her own efforts. The person might be permitted to act in a self-directed fashion only because others who are in a position to exert a governing influence over her choose to stay their hand. Or the person’s autonomous gestures might be contingent on the presence of certain idiosyncratic patterns in her social environment or her psychology that favor bursts of self-governed activity. In these instances, episodes of autonomy transpire despite the person’s inability to manage her environment or despite the fact that others have the ability to hijack capriciously the person’s efforts at self-management. A person does not manage her life when she is subject to the arbitrary will of another or when her ability to realize her values is incumbent on good fortune rather than on her labors. In such cases, she does not have global autonomy. For a fuller treatment of the distinction between autonomy simpliciter and autonomy with respect to certain traits and certain choices, see my *Personal Autonomy in Society* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> I thank Holger Baumann for raising the worry about idealization in discussion.

experiment test designed to hone in on aspects of a person's life that are fundamental to what the person cares about and to how she sees herself. What survive are certain traits of character that are intractable aspects of a person's self-conception, some because their absence is unthinkable, others because they are inescapable. But although autonomous agency is oriented around essential aspects of a person's identity, including the somewhat mysterious "volitionally necessary" aspects, autonomous agency does not require that a person operate with a conception of herself that is authentic in the Frankfurtian sense—that is to say, with a conception of herself that she has no wish to repudiate. That is, autonomy does not require that a person is authentic, in the standard sense, vis-à-vis the volitionally central components of her character. As examples, consider the situations of two persons who are autonomous but who are uncomfortable with this status. One person is a newly liberated prisoner.<sup>23</sup> The other person is the CEO (chief executive officer) of a successful advertising agency. In their respective circumstances, each is self-governing. Each has the authority to direct aspects of their lives of key import within a framework of rules, values, principles, beliefs, and pro-attitudes they have established for themselves. Despite this, the liberated prisoner finds that autonomy is a weight, something that taxes him as much as it sustains him and does him good, and he is worn tired by the expectation that he look after himself. And as for the CEO, while her temperament suits the demands of her life, her heart is conflicted and her self-conception is ambivalent. With increasing frequency and urgency, she experiences a desire to give herself over to the direction and care of other human beings. Yet try as she might, she cannot convince herself, and less so convince the world, that this desire is a sincere, authentic expression of her will. Her will is frustrated because it is conflicted and because the world has not accommodated her as she would like. One who contends that psychological authenticity is the hallmark of autonomy would deny autonomy of the woman. On the face of it, she lacks "a self-chosen identity rooted in [her] most abiding feelings and firmest convictions."<sup>24</sup> Though she creates her character out of her own activity, this character somehow fails to satisfy her personal ideal. Like the person discomfited by his recent liberation, the woman experiences far more autonomy than she would wish, and less than she appears to know what to do with.

But in neither the case of the recently freed prisoner nor that of the malcontented woman does this misfortune yield an absence of autonomy. Consider, first, that persons need not be happy with the social relations they occupy if they are to be autonomous. The independent woman and the ex-prisoner are expected to look after themselves, but this expectation can hardly be said to inhibit their power and authority to govern their lives according to principles and values they have settled on. The disaffectedness that marks their attitudes toward their lives and the alienation they feel toward the facts of their respective situations does not signal a general lack of autonomy, even if

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<sup>23</sup> Holger Baumann raised a similar case in discussion.

<sup>24</sup> Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, p. 61.

it curbs their relative enjoyment of autonomy. Unhappiness with oneself is compatible with autonomy, as is dissatisfaction with one's place in the world.<sup>25</sup>

Nor does the fact that these two persons are uncomfortable with their lives mean that key elements of their identity have been suppressed by others. Of course, if this were true we would question their autonomy, but for reasons that have little to do with disaffectedness. The fact that a person confronts a world that is "inhospitable to one's true self" and where one "lack[s] the power to win it over" may enervate autonomy for the simple reason that to be so positioned makes the realization of one's self-management a more onerous enterprise. I may be perfectly content with myself, have no regrets about the kind of person I am, but be deeply dissatisfied with my place in the world for no reason other than that it denies me *de facto* power over my life and thus denies me autonomy. But absent evidence to the contrary, we cannot describe the case of the discomfited ex-prisoner or the frustrated woman as examples of compromised autonomy simply on the basis of psychological dissonance or conflicted identity. It is implausible to deny autonomy of a person simply because the person cannot configure her desires to her situation just as it is implausible to claim autonomy for a person who simply configures her desires to suit an unpalatable situation.

Indeed, I would maintain that an autonomous person may be resigned to certain aspects of her life and resigned to the fact that some choices are unthinkable for her; she may not endorse the fact that her will is inhibited in these ways or she may register ambivalence. For example, I might be resigned to the fact that I am prone to be impetuous at the same time I admit that this characteristic is sufficiently deep-rooted to have an effect on the direction I wield over my behavior. I might be more autonomous, or find self-governance more readily available to me, if I were less impetuous. But of itself, any resignation I experience should not signal inauthenticity and heteronomy as the standard account holds, just as my autonomy need not be enhanced by the fact that I might accept my impetuous temperament.

Among the indispensable components of autonomy are substantive external social conditions. To be autonomous is to stand in a certain position of authority over one's life, notably with respect to others. Because being autonomous requires in typical cases that a person is in a certain kind of social network, what decides autonomy is the effect social roles and dispositional characteristics have on a person's life. Whatever constraints of volition, of circumstance, or of character obtain, a person must have the latitude to manage affairs of fundamental consequence in his life within the context of values, principles, and beliefs that he has set for himself. If aspects of a person's life and personality impugn autonomy, they do so for reasons other than their inauthentic character. Thus, if there is an account of authenticity of use in analyzing autonomous agency, it is an account other than one such as Frankfurt offers.

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<sup>25</sup> Meyers denies this. See *ibid.*, p. 74.

## 4. Authenticity as Self-Fulfillment

If some conception of authenticity is to bear on autonomy and the standard conception will not do, perhaps what we want is a notion that expresses a moral ideal, such as the ideal of being true to oneself. Charles Taylor alleges that it is just such an ideal that Johann Herder, writing in the second half of the eighteenth century, meant the concept of authenticity to capture. I have little acquaintance with Herder's work, but I will assume Taylor is correct when he describes Herder's as the view that "each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own 'measure' is his way of putting it."<sup>26</sup> One who embraces this idea is inclined to believe that

[e]veryone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called upon to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfillment. What this consists of, each must, in the last instance, determine for him-or-herself. No one else can or should try to dictate its content.<sup>27</sup>

A Herderian ideal of authenticity appears to be at the heart of certain accounts of autonomy, such as those defended by Diana Meyers, Marilyn Friedman, and John Christman.<sup>28</sup> These accounts focus on the subjective, highly individualistic good of self-fulfillment and are content-neutral in that they decline to impose substantive and value-laden constraints upon the constitutive elements of autonomy. They decline to do this because autonomy is, so they argue, a liberal value (that is, a value that occupies center stage in liberal societies). If we make autonomy consist of the satisfaction of certain ways of being to the exclusion of others—if a theory of autonomy imports substantive constraints upon what a life must be like if it is to count as autonomous—then persons whose lifestyles fall short of the substantive ideal will be deemed heteronomous. Having denied autonomy to persons, it is a short step (we are told) to denying such persons the rights that autonomous persons in a liberal society are typically accorded, such as a right to a political voice. What is wanted is an account of autonomy that has wide scope and some degree of flexibility, an account that can address the various lifestyles and self-conceptions embraced by competent, independent adults.

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<sup>26</sup> "Jeder Mensch haat ein eigenes Mass, gleichsam eine eigne Stimmung aller seiner sinnlichen Gefühle zu einander." Johann Herder, *Ideen*, vii.I, in *Herders Sämtliche Werke*, vol. XIII, ed. Bernard Suphan (Berlin: Weidman, 1877–1913), p. 291. Quoted by Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, n. 22, p. 127. Here is my attempt at translation: "Each human being has a particular measure, as it were a disposition fitting ('suited to') their feelings toward ('sense of') one another."

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> In discussion, Beate Rössler pointed out that Herder's theory of authenticity was intended as an alternative to Kantian accounts of autonomy. It should be apparent to the reader that I am not offering a Kantian account of autonomy, nor are the accounts of autonomy qua procedural authenticity that I critically examine Kantian.

But it seems to me that if we want this it is because we subscribe to a view of authenticity much like the Herderian ideal. Defenders of contentneutral accounts contend that, to the degree we embrace political liberalism, we are committed to the view that

only individuals can be the measure of their own autonomy. Apart from the formal good of an integrated personality, and the procedural good of autonomy competency, autonomous lives are remarkable more for their differences than for their similarities. To affirm a list of universal personal goods or an account of an objectively good personal life and to maintain that every autonomous life must realize such goods is to deny the uniqueness of individuals. It is to create a mold that autonomous lives must inevitably break.”<sup>29</sup>

This view assumes that liberalism relies on autonomy as a basis for political participation; that liberalism is grounded on the beliefs that human beings have a moral right to be in command of their own destiny; and that “individuals are self-creating, that no single good defines successful self-creation; and that taking responsibility for one’s life and making of it what one can is itself part of the good life.”<sup>30</sup> And this is just to say that liberalism is grounded in beliefs about the value of some variety of autonomy.

However, it does not follow that liberalism requires a conception of autonomy as “authenticity as content-neutral self-fulfillment.” Liberalism assumes a right to autonomy understood as something like the Herderian ideal, but this is actually a moral right to autonomy of a sort that even a nonautonomous person claims. However, a moral right by itself cannot ensure the robust, practical variety of autonomy demanded for involvement in the democratic process. One can retain a moral right to autonomy despite lacking autonomy in fact.

More to the point, while authenticity might be at the heart of selffulfillment, self-fulfillment is not autonomy. I am not quite sure what it means to realize oneself, but I am fairly certain that it does not stand double-duty for autonomy: to realize is to make real, to bring to fruition, to accomplish, or give life to whatever is the object—perhaps in the case of persons, this object is the agent’s essential traits of character. But we can speak meaningfully of the person who realizes herself in this fashion at the same time as we acknowledge the person’s lack of autonomy. A person’s “original way of being human” may fail to include an interest in autonomy.<sup>31</sup> Persons might be true to themselves and their lives may be “grounded on their own sense of what is really

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<sup>29</sup> Meyers, *Self, Society, and Personal Choice*, p. 82.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Ryan, “Liberalism,” in Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 291–311, at p. 292.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Raz discusses such cases in *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 390–91.

important” at the same time that they fail to hold authority over their lives. This might be the case if, for instance, a person’s sense of fulfillment leads her to engage in extremes of self-sacrificing behavior.<sup>32</sup> It may even be in a person’s interest that she be manipulated into a state of well-being, or that paternalistic measures are taken to advance her well-being, yet these methods arguably compromise autonomy.

While a viable analysis of autonomy must certainly allow for the variety of distinctive lives agents can lead, I believe it must do so within the confines of objective requirements for autonomy, requirements that proponents of content-neutral authenticity accounts claim are inconsonant with autonomy. I cannot take up the reasons why this is so in this paper.<sup>33</sup> But it seems sensible that just as some conditions and some choices are significant independently of our deeming them so, so too are some conditions and choices markers of autonomy independently of the self-fulfillment they supply. In fact, if “all options are equally worthy, because they have been freely chosen, and it is choice that confers worth,”<sup>34</sup> then authenticity in the senses we have been considering so far—endorsement, satisfaction, self-fulfillment—may well become deprived of a “horizon” or background against which ways of being have significance. What is important for autonomy is that a person has a standing that accords her the power to make choices expressive of her will and to revise these choices if need be. This calls for practical control rather than authenticity of a sort that signals endorsement, an absence of alienation, or being true to oneself. Unless some content is given to autonomy, such that some ways of being are consonant with autonomy, “others less so, still others not at all, anterior to choice”<sup>35</sup> autonomy loses its value as a practical liberal ideal.

## 5. Authenticity as Acknowledgment

There is a family of notions of authenticity at the center of which are the Herderian and Frankfurtian ideals, according to which a person lives authentically when she lives in a manner that implies hypothetical endorsement of the family of beliefs, desires, and values foundational to her life. I have stated that these notions of authenticity have less to do with autonomy than one might suppose. However, there are interpretations of authenticity of relevance to autonomy, even if they are not so essential as to make autonomy unachievable in their absence. Among these is the epistemic conception of authenticity offered by Karl Jaspers and taken up by Larry May.

The idea of authenticity pressed by Jaspers consists in truthfulness toward oneself and about oneself in word and in deed. There are a number of ways in which a person

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<sup>32</sup> For a defense of the view that autonomy is possible given a voluntary abdication of liberty and the acceptance of a regimented life, see Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy*, chapter one.

<sup>33</sup> See my *Personal Autonomy in Society* for further discussion.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 37–38.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

can be dishonest with herself, ranging from self-deception at one end to more subtle failures to acknowledge salient facts about oneself.<sup>36</sup> According to May, authenticity, like autonomy, depends upon “having a sense of what is important to oneself.”<sup>37</sup> But May notes that authenticity calls for more than this, something along the lines of integrity: one who is authentic “meets head on his or her faults ... and regards oneself as at least partially responsible for them,”<sup>38</sup> not so much in the sense of having been the causal origin of these but in the sense of owning up to them, even perhaps of “standing behind one’s choices”<sup>39</sup> but of doing so even while not endorsing them and even if one feels alienated from them. One who is authentic is honest about the “legacy [she] inherits from [her] past thoughts and feelings and doings.”<sup>40</sup> By contrast, one is inauthentic or lives inauthentically when one is not honest with oneself and, perhaps, others about one’s position in the world and about one’s ability to transform or even take a stance with respect to that position. Similarly, one is inauthentic when one refuses to acknowledge facts about one’s legacy and about one’s position in the world, particularly in circumstances that pressure one to do so.

Depending on the circumstances, owning up to transformative events in one’s life, events that figure importantly in one’s history and that color one’s legacy, might be a private matter. No public acknowledgment may be needed. Other cases might call for a public acknowledgment. If one’s legacy clearly rests on one’s public reputation, as in the case of Günter Grass, the failure to acknowledge publicly facts about oneself could count as a moral failure, an abrogation of an obligation one owes to others in view of one’s position in the world. However, whether or not a public revelation of one’s record is warranted on moral grounds, it is the epistemic shortcoming that will have bearing on the actor’s autonomy. A lack of authenticity marks a kind of dishonesty with respect to one’s self. Any theory of autonomy should take authenticity of this sort seriously, because dishonesty of this sort is an epistemic condition prone to interfere with autonomy. (If Herder had this in mind when he spoke of being true to oneself, then surely his is wise counsel.) The dishonest, inauthentic party refuses to or fails to attend to the manner in which his position in the world and his associations with others play out in social interaction, whereas the authentic party makes a sincere attempt to be explicit with herself about these things. At the very least, inauthenticity is a matter of not giving enough attention to aspects of one’s identity that are central. But honesty

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<sup>36</sup> A nice analysis of the phenomenon of self-deception and its effect on the moral status of persons is offered by Stephen Darwall in “Self-Deception, Autonomy, and Moral Constitution,” in Brian P. McLaughlin and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (eds.), *Perspectives on Self-Deception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 407–30.

<sup>37</sup> Larry May, “Metaphysical Guilt and Moral Taint,” in Larry May and Stacey Hoffman (eds.), *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), pp. 239–54, at p. 243.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 86.

of this variety seems crucial if a person is to have control over her life. Inauthenticity qua denial of crucial features of one's life creates a kind of practical disability and makes self-governance a more complicated endeavor.<sup>41</sup>

David Kaczynski was authentic in this sense. The sad fact is that key aspects of David Kaczynski's identity, and his life, are bound up with that of his brother, Ted. David might have done just as well—even better—in terms of self-fulfillment if he were to ignore, even repudiate or dissociate himself from, the circumstantial ill luck of being connected by blood and in the public mind with so disturbed a person as his brother. And one might think that David would have a better chance for a selfdetermined life if he had turned his back on his connections, of blood and of shared history, to Ted. But if David Kaczynski was to be true to himself—if he is to be authentic as Jaspers and May recommend—then he had to confront his brother's legacy of wrongdoing (as well as whatever role he may have played in assisting Ted), and in fact David did just this.<sup>42</sup> Authenticity of the sort relevant to autonomy involves owning up to but not necessarily endorsing one's legacy of commitments as well as one's current associations. If David had refused to do this, he would have lived a lie, a stranger to himself if not to the public. And I cannot help but think that would complicate his efforts to be autonomous.

By contrast, Günter Grass was not authentic in the Jaspersian sense, even if his life counted as authentic in the senses described by Frankfurt and by Herder. We might assume, charitably, that Grass does not endorse his behavior and that he does not believe the time he had spent in the SS reflects something essential to his identity—he was, after all, only seventeen at the time, and he was conscripted into service. Even though we cannot claim that Grass's failure to disclose his Nazi past was a manifestation of self-deception, Grass allowed himself to become—indeed, had actively fashioned himself into—someone whose public face urged principles for conducting one's life autonomously and honestly even as this depended on a failure to acknowledge the legacy of his personal history. Grass did not own up to a part of his history and this failure contradicted his postwar persona.

We can speculate as to why Grass chose to keep this chapter of his past a secret, just as we can guess why he chose to come forward at this moment. Some have suggested that Grass benefited artistically from his silence. Nathan Thorburgh, writing in *Time* magazine, contends that

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<sup>41</sup> One might go so far as to allege that inauthenticity violates certain duties we have to ourselves, if we believe, as Kant asserted, that there are such perfect duties to ourselves and others in virtue of our autonomy.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Raz raises a similar point: He remarks that identity-forming attachments “are the sources of meaning in one's life, and sources of responsibilities ... They are normative because they engage our integrity. We must be true to who we are, true to it even as we try to change. Thus, identity-forming attachments are the organizing principles of our life ... They give it shape as well as meaning. In all that, they are among the determinants of our individuality. And they are partly past dependent. To deny our past is to be false to ourselves.” Joseph Raz, *Value, Respect, and Attachment* (The Seely Lectures) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 34.

[i]f Grass had not been living with this wretched little skeleton in his closet, he might never have written a word. Like 99% of his compatriots, he might have just dusted himself off at war's end, said his 20 Hail Marys, and gone about joining the blithely ahistorical postwar boom. Instead, a haunted Grass cranked out a series of brutal novels about the war and childhood in occupied Poland, beginning with his powerful 1959 novel *The Tin Drum*. Those unforgettable narratives, along with a good measure of his public hectoring and politicking, helped his entire country stave off collective amnesia for decades. So while his opponents, and even a share of his friends, are piling on him about the lies he told about his past, it's worth considering that those personal lies helped keep alive important national truths.<sup>43</sup>

Whatever benefit might have accrued as a result of his tormented past, and despite an outpouring of support from some quarters of the international literary community, the fallout has been considerable. Some have called upon Grass to relinquish the Nobel Prize awarded him for literature in 1999. And Malgorzata Rakowiec, reporting for Reuters from Gdansk, writes that "Poland's ruling party called on Grass to give up his honorary citizenship of the port city Gdansk":

It is unacceptable for a city where the first blood was shed, where World War Two began, to have a Waffen-SS member as an honorary citizen," Jacek Kurski, a member of the ruling Law and Justice party and parliamentary deputy from Gdansk, told a news conference ... Kurski said his party would propose a resolution to the Gdansk city council to strip Grass of his honorary citizenship if the author failed to surrender it on his own ... Former Polish president Lech Walesa, himself an honorary citizen of Gdansk and a Nobel peace prize winner, urged Grass to give up the honorary title himself rather than wait for Gdansk officials to strip him of it. "Who will talk to him here now or invite him?" Walesa told Reuters. "I am happy we never met, that I never had to shake his hand. I lost my father in the war and Grass was in the SS."<sup>44</sup>

It is almost certain, however, that whatever Grass stands to gain as a result of this disclosure will be primarily a matter of personal integrity. "Those who want to judge can judge," Grass told German [public broadcaster] ARD ... Discussing his decades-long silence on the issue, the author said: "This life I led later was characterized, among other things, by this sense of shame."<sup>45</sup> Perhaps this indicates that Grass was internally conflicted in the manner that procedural authenticity theorists claim is incompatible

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<sup>43</sup> *Time*, August 14, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> "Grass asked to give up Polish title," Gdansk, Poland (Reuters), Monday, August 14, 2006. news.scotsman.com. Walesa subsequently rescinded the request.

<sup>45</sup> "Waffen SS Admission: Grass Seeks to Cleanse Reputation," *Der Spiegel Online International*, August 17, 2006, service.spiegel.de 189,00.html. The interview continues: "Grass said he felt the work

with autonomy. It should be clear from what I have already said that I think such conflict is compatible with autonomy. Nonetheless, to simplify the example, we can stipulate that Grass was not conflicted to such a degree that he was incapable of taking stock of himself. It remains that a lifetime of dishonesty with respect to his position in the world is now part of Grass's legacy.

Whether Grass's was in fact a life rich in what I call "local" autonomy is a question I am not in a position to answer.<sup>46</sup> At one level, inauthenticity may have had little effect on Grass's ability to manage his life. He was, after all, quite successful in his work and in creating a name for himself. But the point is not that lying and deceit enervate autonomy, or that lying and deceit alone amount to inauthenticity. We can imagine a host of common cases—the lying thief, the cleverly deceitful lover—in which autonomy and dishonesty coexist with relative ease. Rather, inauthenticity of the sort of which Jaspers and May speak, the sort that enervates autonomy, occurs when the subject of deceit is what is most distinctive of and essential to a person's life, to his relations with others, and to his legacy. Dishonesty has implications for autonomy when it is far-reaching—when it results in living a life that is inauthentic in the sense of calling for suppression, fabrication, deceit, and denial. This is the sort of inauthenticity that marked Grass's life. In these circumstances, Grass's autonomy in his relationships with the public (and perhaps with family and friends as well) could only continue to be within his control against a background of smoke and mirrors. Grass was, it appears, a good actor, and perhaps he convinced himself, as he did the world, that his life was no act. Still, Grass's life *was* a performance—maybe not *just* a performance, but largely one—and even if he autonomously fashioned the role and freely occupied it, it was a role nonetheless, and it evaporated when the play was over. I cannot help but suspect that, as a result, Grass lived in a way that made it difficult to fully abide by the principles he had set for himself, and that this compromised his autonomy.

## Conclusion

The standard view of authenticity demands more than is necessary for a plausible account of autonomy vis-à-vis one's choices and actions. Certainly, there is a sense in which autonomy requires that a person not be disaffected from the aspects of her life to the point of denying these aspects as central to herself. Without a core self-conception that grounds self-government,

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he had done as an author and an outspoken public citizen was sufficient to compensate for what he did as a youth during the years Germany was controlled by the Nazis. Despite the growing uproar over his confession, Grass has said he will not retreat from public life. 'I will continue to express myself as an author and as a citizen,' he said. Still, Grass said little about his experiences in the Waffen SS in interview, instead calling on people to read his book. 'The only thing I can say about this is: It's a theme in this book. I spent three years working on it and it includes everything I have to say about this issue.'"

<sup>46</sup> See n. 21 above.

it would ... become impossible for us to involve ourselves conscientiously and responsibly in managing the course of our intentions and decisions. We would have no settled interest in designing or sustaining any particular continuity in the configurations of our will. A major aspect of our reflective connection to ourselves, in which our distinctive character as human beings lies, would thus be severed. Our lives would be passive, fragmented, and thereby drastically impaired.<sup>47</sup>

But a person can be autonomous despite the fact that she is alienated from aspects of her character or her history that bear on how she conceives of herself. For this reason, I reject the idea that reflective endorsement of key aspects of a person's identity, or an absence of estrangement from these aspects subsequent to critical scrutiny, is a requirement of autonomy.<sup>48</sup> What is required instead is that a person be disposed to acknowledge the aspects of her character and history that anchor or contradict her self-conception. When a person acknowledges her disaffectedness from certain aspects of her identity, even if this introduces ambivalence into her life, autonomy is on steadier ground.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, p. 53.

<sup>48</sup> Certainly such endorsement is not sufficient for autonomy, for a person might endorse principles for living in a way that calls for a relinquishment of autonomy.

<sup>49</sup> This paper was presented at the Workshop on Social Conceptions of Autonomy at the University of Zürich on October 16, 2006, and to the Philosophy Faculty Colloquia at the University of Leiden on April 12, 2007. I thank the members of both audiences for the discussion on those occasions. I owe special thanks to Holger Baumann, who commented on the paper in Zürich, and to Anton Leist for inviting me to the workshop. An earlier version of the paper benefited from discussion at the Cogitators philosophy group at the University of Florida. In particular I thank David Copp and Jon Tresan for their written comments. The editors and the referees of this journal also provided helpful comments.

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Marina Oshana  
Autonomy and the Question of Authenticity  
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The paper seeks to differentiate various conceptions of authenticity to assess their relevance to a plausible theory of autonomous agency. Drawing on the works of Karl Jaspers and Charles Taylor, it argues that the prevalent view of authenticity—grounded in the Herderian ideal—fails to account for deeper aspects of autonomy. The author posits that while authenticity is not a prerequisite for autonomy, an epistemic form of authenticity, rooted in recognition of one’s identity and history, plays a significant role in the concept of autonomous action.

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