The Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 0, No. 0 *2025*
ISSN 0031-8094 https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaf008

Becoming authentic: A social conception of the self

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*Two approaches to authenticity have gained currency in the recent analytic philosophical literature. The first takes authenticity to be a property of how people act (*authentic agency*). The second takes it to be a property of who people are (*authentic self*). This paper motivates both views, then argues that there is a dependency between the two: the exercise of authentic agency depends on the possession of an authentic self, while the possession of an authentic self relies on the prior exercise of authentic agency. On a particular,* individualist *conception of the self, this leads to a paradox. This paradox is resolved if one instead adopts a* social *conception of the self, according to which the self is partially ontologically constituted by other agents (a 'we', rather than an 'I').*

Keywords: Authenticity; Self; Agency; Social self.

Some people claim that we should live lives that express our self in what we do and who we are—call this *authenticity*. People who make this claim face a challenge in explaining why the self matters for how we live our lives. It is not obvious that it should. In cases where no overarching moral considerations are at stake, people may be able to avoid a lot of suffering (for both themselves and others) if they put their idiosyncratic preferences and values aside[1] and instead conform to the expectations and values of the society around them. One response to this is to argue that it is not purely arbitrary who we are—we

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[1] Philosophers often equate expressing the self with expressing one's deepest preferences and values. Later, I will argue that this is not quite right, but let us assume that it is for now, bracketing any concerns about what preferences and values count as 'deepest'.

ourselves play an active and intentional role in shaping who we become. A diverse group of philosophers has emphasized the distinctive value that comes from living according to our self-made, and thereby self-determining, commitments to projects and relationships (e.g. Nagel 1986; Calhoun 2009; Chang 2017). But the ways we shape our selves derive ultimately from preferences and values that we possess in virtue of the arbitrary circumstances in which we happened to be born and raised. So perhaps the self is arbitrary, all the way down. If so, where does that leave *authenticity*?

In this paper, I develop and make precise this challenge for philosophical accounts of what it means to live and make decisions authentically. After arguing for a series of constraints on account of authenticity, I argue that authenticity is incompatible with a popular understanding of the self as something distinctly individual—an 'I' rather than a 'we'. Call this the *individualist self*. As I will argue below, it is straightforward to generate a paradox, given reasonable and widely endorsed assumptions about authenticity, on the assumption of an individualist self.

One may wonder whether anyone still seriously holds onto the idea of an individualist self. Even the notion of individualism smacks of anachronism. But as I will argue in Section IV, the individualist self continues to underlie influential recent accounts of authenticity (e.g. Paul 2014). While some writers have criticized individualistic accounts of authenticity, emphasizing the social embeddedness and social dependence of the self (e.g. MacIntyre 1978, 1984; Sandel 1982; Taylor 1985, 1992), I do not believe that these criticisms have gone far enough. For example, MacIntyre (1984) argues that the self is embedded in and shaped by the social world, while Taylor (1992) criticizes individualistic notions of authenticity by arguing that dialogue with others shapes who one is and what one becomes. But neither author goes so far as to reject the individualist self. An individualist self is not necessarily an antisocial self. It may be shaped by others (Higgins 2020; Dover 2022), it may possess relational properties such as 'being the sister of X', it may draw on a background of shared practices that other people provide, and it may even be interdependent with others (Conover 1995). What distinguishes an individualist self is not that it is unaffected by other people, but that it is not ontologically constituted by other people. As I will go on to argue, this distinction matters.

I suggest that rather than rejecting the possibility that people can lead authentic lives, we reject the individualist self. A notable minority of philosophers already do. James (1890: 291), for example, writes 'a man's Self is the sum of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works…' Similarly, Heersmink (2018) argues for a narrative self view in which the self is partially constituted by a distributed network of other people and external artefacts. Japanese philosopher Deguchi (2022) has recently provided an extended defence of a non-individualist self, arguing that

many philosophers in the East Asian tradition—such as Dōgen and other Zen philosophers—have conceptualized the self as something essentially social, a 'we' rather than an 'I'. This view does not deny that there is an 'I'; instead, it makes a distinction between 'I' and the self. Deguchi presents the self as a multi-agent system, composed not just of 'me' but also of the many others on whom I rely in my actions and decision-making. In this view, the self is strictly and literally composed of multiple agents. While this whole 'we' system is involved in decision making, Deguchi (2022: 10) argues,

> 'I participate and play an important role in these 'we' decisions. Just as the head of an organization, for example, makes the final decision after deliberations and decisions in various departments, I also play a role in pushing the final button after a long and complex process, rather than deciding everything alone. In this sense, I am not an autocrat or dictator, but the final decision-maker.'[2]

The agential 'I' still has a special place in this system, but not the ontological exclusivity that it has in the individualist self picture. Call this family of views the *social self*.[3] For the purposes of this paper, I aim primarily to contrast views of the self that hold that the self is not partly constituted by other persons (the individualist self) from views that hold that it is (the social self) and provide an argument in favour of the latter.[4]

Before beginning the argument proper, let me briefly motivate the intuitions behind the paradox and my solution. I will describe an example and explore how the notion of a social self could help resolve the challenge it raises.

Hana: Hana is coming to the end of her teenage years. She has always been controlled by her parents and community, and she feels that what at first glance appear to be her deepest values, desires, and characteristics are really, when she reflects on it, not her own after all—just something foisted upon her during her upbringing. Feeling a profound sense of disconnect with her current self, she thinks about how to make herself into her own

[2]This is my translation of the original Japanese.

[3]I use the term 'social' because most of the arguments in this paper concern the role of other persons in the self. However, I do not mean to exclude views of the self that take not just other persons but also other objects as possible constituents of the self. I suspect, but do not claim, that the arguments here can be suitably extended to cover non-human entities. Nor am I using the term in the same way as James (1890), where he reserves the term to cover the recognition that someone gets from those around them.

[4]I emphasize 'ontological' because some authors have understood the concept of a social self—i.e., a self partly constituted by other people—to be a self whose *identity* is in some way defined by others (e.g. Sandel 1982; Barclay 2000). On such a view, Barclay (2000: 62) writes, 'the fundamental question for the constitutively social self is not 'What ends shall I choose?' but 'Who am I?' and the latter question is answered by looking inward and discovering one's shared constitutive ends.' This view still presents the self as something distinctly individual—something that can be known by the agent looking inward upon itself. By contrast, an ontologically social self sees other agents as constitutive parts of the self, not merely influences or constraints upon it. The multi-agent system in which the 'I' is embedded does not merely influence the self; it *is* the self.

person—maybe traveling abroad, or going to college, or getting a job. Some of these experiences, she reasons, may transform her, both epistemically and personally. But she wonders if the new person she would become would be any more authentic. After all, since her deepest preferences, values, and feelings were themselves shaped by her upbringing—through all the experiences her parents and society (and her own body) laid out for her—then making a decision about what to do on that basis would be just another way her life was controlled by others, if only indirectly. But putting aside her values and feelings about what she should do would be just as bad, she thinks. So what can Hana do to become her own, authentic person?

A social self view would respond to the challenge Hana faces in two ways. First, it would question whether Hana's current self *is* inauthentic. Even if Hana's core preferences, values, and characteristics depend on those who brought her up, that does not mean they are not her own—they may simply be the expression of a self that extends beyond Hana to the other persons that constitute it, namely those involved in her upbringing. Suppose, however, that Hana's current personal preferences and values were indeed inauthentic. In that case, it would suggest that Hana can still make authentic decisions by thinking through her options with her friends and trusted members of her community and making an executive decision on that basis. By doing so, she would be exercising control over her life's path in her decision-making and in the attributes of herself in which she invests her identity. Her decision would still express her authentic self—but the self expressed is a wider, social self, constituted ontologically by multiple persons and the relationships between them rather than just her as an individual. These two responses form the core of the account I will develop and defend here, in an effort to resolve the paradox to which, I will argue, an individualist conception of the self inevitably leads.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In Section I, I introduce two basic processes underlying how we become who we are. In Section II, I introduce and justify some plausible restrictions on account of authenticity. In Section III, I use these restrictions to provide a precise account of the paradox of authenticity and show how it relies on an assumption of an individualist self. In Section IV, I introduce the social self view, drawing particularly on Deguchi's notion of 'Self-as-We' (われわれとしての自己), and I explain how it can solve the paradox of authenticity. In Section V, I conclude.

I. Two basic processes by which we become who we are

How do we become who we are? This is a big question, but in this section, I will restrict my discussion to two basic elements which will become important later on.

First, though, what kind of identity do I mean when I talk about 'who we are'? I am not referring to what metaphysicians sometimes use the term 'personal identity' to mean, which is the numerical identity of a person through time. Instead, I have in mind something like the following. Imagine someone who is known by his social circle as an extroverted, straight party animal, but who privately knows himself to be an introverted, party-hating gay man. The former could be called his social identity, the latter his personal identity. Both sides of him are, in a rough sense, part of 'who he is.' But there is an important sense in which the latter is more real than the former. If his social circle knew his personal identity, they would realise they were mistaken in their image of him. This does not mean that personal identity is just someone's self-image. People may also be wrong about their own personal identities (at least, in the sense I use the term): after talking to a friend, or reading and reflecting on a thought-provoking novel, they may feel they have learned something or corrected a false belief about themselves. When I talk about becoming who we are, I am concerned about how we develop our personal identities in this sense.

One of the ways we become who we are is by exercising our agency. I understand this broadly. At one end is what could be called the Sartrean view: we make ourselves who we are by our choices, including our choice of what kinds of new experiences to seek out. My transformative experiences upon living in a different country are the result of my choice to move there, and the character of my experience by what I choose to pay attention to and how I choose to do so. At the other end is what could be called the Murdochean view: we determine who we become not just by our decisions, but by the imaginative work—what Midgley (2014: xvi) calls 'reflective, imaginative attention'—that takes place in between decisions, as we attempt to see the world as it is. By engaging in this imaginative work, we build up what Murdoch (1970/2014: 36) terms the 'structures of value' that determine how we experience and engage with the world.

The involvement of our own agency extends to things that other people foist upon us as well, as long as we claim them for our own. We can embrace a stigmatized identity, for example, as people do when they reappropriate slurs like 'queer' or attend Pride parades. In this way, even parts of our identity that are shaped by our surroundings and situation become, through the exercise of our own agency, a self-appropriated part of who we are.

Other people's agency is also tied up in what we become, and not just through that which is foisted upon us. The life-changing conversation I had with a friend is something both of us had a hand in constructing. The life-changing trip abroad, while something I made, was supported and enabled by friends and strangers alike.

So, returning to the question, we become who we are in part by something like the following process:

Agency: we make choices as we go through the day-to-day, reacting to and reflecting on that which surrounds us but also, by our choices, shaping and choosing the surroundings we must react to. Along the way, as we gain new experiences, we form new preferences, desires, and personal characteristics. In our activity, we inevitably rely on others to enable, support, or even partake in our actions and projects. The tapestry of our lives is thus woven through with the agential participation of ourselves and others.

This picture is fitting for a fully capable, autonomous adult. But thinking about human life as a whole, it is somewhat lacking. We have not always been in that state. As newborn infants, we have little agential control over our experiences and surroundings. The same may be true later in life, if we face illness, cognitive decline, or controlling, abusive relationships. Since everyone experiences childhood, but not everyone faces such challenges in later life, I suggest the following as another basic process by which we all become who we are:

Development: We begin our lives wholly dependent on others. As we grow, we learn from those around us, and we form preferences, desires, and characteristics. At least in the early phase of our life, these result mainly from our nature and our nurture, rather than from our own active choosing. These preferences, desires, and characteristics change a great deal during our early years, in part as we undergo a series of transformative experiences imposed upon us (such as meeting developmental milestones, joining school, undergoing puberty) that ultimately shape us into our adult selves.[5]

So we become who we are at least in part through *agency* and *development*. *Agency* will be a major theme running through the next three sections. *Development* will return when I introduce the paradox of authenticity in Section III.

II. Two approaches to authenticity

Various philosophers have argued that this process of becoming who we are is constrained by the value of authenticity. Grene (1952) identifies two main philosophical approaches to authenticity, one stemming from Heidegger (1927), the other from Sartre (1943). To draw a rough distinction between them, Heidegger focuses on authenticity of the self (i.e., what it is to be an authentic person), while Sartre is concerned primarily with authenticity in agency (i.e., what it is to act authentically). Both versions have been widely taken up by more recent authors. For example, following Heidegger is Dworkin (2011: 204), who describes the principle of authenticity as holding that 'each person has a special, personal responsibility for identifying what counts as success in his own life; he has a personal responsibility to create

[5]This reflects Baier's characterization of agents as 'second persons', who are 'essentially successors, heirs to other persons who formed and cared for them' (Baier 1985: 85).

that life through a coherent narrative or style that he himself endorses'; and following Sartre is Paul (2014: 111), who, in her work on transformative experience, argues that taking decisions authentically involves 'the ideal of self-realization through choice and control of our subjective futures'. Despite the differences between these two notions of authenticity, they are usually taken to share some common features—most notably, I will argue, a requirement that one exercises some kind of control over the path of one's life and the person one becomes. In the next two sections, I will discuss each of the two main approaches to authenticity and their relation to control.

II.1 The authentic self

For authors like Heidegger (1927), and more recently Dworkin (2011), having an authentic self means (at a minimum) exercising some kind of control over who one becomes—that is, having a self that is a product of its own self-authoring (Haugeland 2013). The importance of control to authenticity is widely recognized in applied philosophy. For example, in a discussion of psychopharmaceutical enhancements, Elliot (1998: 182) writes, '[i]t would be worrying if Prozac altered my personality, even if it gave me a better personality, simply because it isn't *my* personality. This kind of personality change seems to defy an ethic of authenticity'. The thought here appears to be that by surrendering control of my personality to a drug, I lose authenticity. Similar claims could be made about surrendering control of my moral values (e.g. if I take a pill that gives me moral views that I did not possess prior to taking the pill, or that takes away those I already had) or of my deepest preferences (e.g. by being the victim of non-consensual hypnosis).

To bring out this intuition, let us return to the case of Hana. Suppose that, after marrying, she surrenders control over the path of her life to her husband and his family, always doing what they tell her to. While not strictly speaking prevented from making her own decisions, she is in an abusive household and fears exerting her own will. Submitting to the control of her husband and family, through fear and desperation, she undergoes various transformative experiences, including having children, moving from the city to a small rural town, and joining a church, that shape her values and her character. At this point, she reflects on her life: the person she has become does not feel authentic to her. It is something foisted upon her by others, something where others exercised control over the life events that made her who she became. This suggests the following claim:

**Authentic self:* My authentic self is the product of a life in which I exercised control over what made me who I am.

However, this claim is too demanding. Few people manage to have control over all the life events that shaped who we are. Life is full of transformative experiences, and these leave us changed in ways that we cannot anticipate,

nor perhaps even imagine, and certainly not control (Paul 2014). Nonetheless, transformative experiences may only affect a part of who we are—they may affect a limited set of values, characteristics, and desires within a particular domain. People change when they become parents, for example, but they do not become wholly different people. Ordinarily, at least some of what they had before remains. So it seems natural to think that the authentic core that remains (if there is one), and not any parts that were rendered inauthentic by events over which one surrendered control, is one's authentic self. If Hana were asked what her self truly is, she would presumably answer that it is whatever was left over from before the transformations wrought upon her by her abusive family.

**Authentic self:* My authentic self is the part of me that is the product of when I exercised control over what made me who I am.

One worry about this claim is whether it is focused too firmly on decision-making. A focus on decision-making makes sense for examples like *Hana*; however, much of what pertains to an authentic self does not easily fit into these categories. Consider the following example:

Kai: Kai grows up in a conservative, homophobic environment. He feels sexually attracted to his friend Adam, and at first he rejects these urges. But after time and reflection, he instead comes to embrace them as a fundamental part of who he is. In an effort to live authentically, Kai eventually rejects his upbringing, leaves town, and begins living openly as a gay man. But after a while, he begins to wonder if his current life is any more authentic than it was before. His experiences don't quite fit the labels that he has adopted, labels which in any case possess a history that he doesn't recognize as his own (See e.g. Yon-Leau and Muñoz-Laboy 2010). Feeling a profound sense of disconnect with his current self, he thinks about how he can develop a more authentic self by adopting different ways of thinking about his identity that fit his experiences better. But he wonders if this new self would be any more authentic. After all, even the way he understands and experiences his own feelings—the yardstick by which he would judge the suitability of another way of understanding himself—is coloured and shaped by the conceptual categories he inherited. So what can Kai do to be his own, authentic person?

One may think that this challenge doesn't get off the ground, because Kai has necessarily made an authentic choice in choosing to reject his upbringing and live openly as a gay man. The thought is that choices which set one at odds with the society in which one was raised are inherently authentic: they cannot come from within the society itself, because they involve a rejection of the society's values, and so, unless there is some other source from which they were adopted, they inherently express something unique to the self.

I think this would be a mistake. Societal values and norms shape transgressive behaviour as much as rule-abiding behaviour. When people rebel against the world of their upbringing, they often do so in a way that is

time-honoured and bound by as rigid a set of norms and conventions as the social practices they reject. Krauss et al. (1984: 5) argue that 'conflict is ubiquitous, normal, and integral to the workings of every society. More explicitly, conflict [arises] from the very structure of society itself, not as something alien which occasionally emerges to disrupt the social order'. A similar point was made by Foljambe (2008: 226), echoing Bataille: 'The taboo does not banish the transgression but, on the contrary, depends upon it, just as the transgression depends on the existence of the taboo'. And see also MacIntyre (1984: 221): 'Notice that rebellion against my [social and historical] identity is always one possible mode of expressing it'. The category of *gay man* through which Kai understands his identity is not something that Kai himself invented, nor something that arose independently of the homophobic mainstream to his society. Halperin (1990) has argued that the category arose in part from a 19th-century discourse in medicine and psychiatry that presented homosexuality as a disorder to be treated, rather than as a legitimate social identity. So, far from involving a complete rejection of the system of values in which he was raised, Kai's identity as a gay man is itself structured and enabled by the society that marks his identity as transgressive. (My claim here is not that Kai's identity is thus necessarily inauthentic—but explaining why is not trivial, and my own account will need to wait until Section IV.)

For Kai, his attempts to understand and live authentically with his sexuality do not relate to formative events in his life or to transformative decisions he might face. Instead, they relate to the attributes he possesses (in his case, his sexuality, but for others it may be physical or neurological attributes) and the conceptual tools he uses to understand them.

Nonetheless, it is not beyond us to critically engage with the meanings we give to our attributes (and those of others) and with the way we understand the world. Like decision-making, this is a process over which we can at least sometimes exercise control. Murdoch (1970/2014: 16–17) gives the example of a mother-in-law, M, who sees her daughter-in-law D as 'pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile', though never lets this judgment reflect itself in her decision-making, since she is determined to behave well toward D. M wonders if she is being unfair to D, and thinks to herself, 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again'. At this point, M pays what Murdoch describes as 'just and loving attention' to D, reflecting deliberately and attentively on D until the way she sees D begins to change. 'D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on'. In this example, M has exercised control over the way she saw the world (and, in particular, the way she saw D) by paying deliberate and selective attention. It seems reasonable to describe the way she now sees D as more authentic than before,

reflecting her own self-driven and active reflections rather than the prejudices and fashions that she had been brought up with. In a similar way, someone can exercise control over the meanings they give to their attributes. For example, someone may at first, after being diagnosed with autism, see it as a defect they are forced to bear, not part of who they really are; but, by paying deliberate and loving attention to themselves in the way Murdoch describes, come instead to identify with it and cherish it as a valuable part of their identity. So, the control relevant for developing an authentic self is expressed not just in the decisions we make, but also in the meanings we give to things and the way we come to see the world.

Nonetheless, there still seems to be something lacking in this control-based account of an authentic self. It is not simply having control that is important—it is exercising that control authentically. To show this, let me borrow an example from Frankfurt's classic discussion of second-order desires (1971: 12). Frankfurt describes a drug addict who

> '…hates his addiction and always struggles desperately, although to no avail, against its thrust. He tries everything that he thinks might enable him to overcome his desires for the drug. But these desires are too powerful for him to withstand, and invariably, in the end, they conquer him. He is an unwilling addict, helplessly violated by his own desires.'

In a very thin sense of the word, this addict has control over his choices. He is not forced by others to inject, and each time he does, it is the result of a choice that is his alone. It may even be the case that these choices play an outsize role in making him who he is—perhaps his drug addiction led him through a series of transformative experiences, such as losing his job, then his home, then the vigour that used to characterize him. But that does not make his choices authentic. There is a deeper sense in which he lacks control over his choices. The self he creates through these choices will feel alienating to him: they did not express something deeper about who he is. Those choices were not authentically his because he did not exercise authentic control over them. Of course, this begs the question about what it is to exercise control authentically. Frankfurt would answer that it involves identifying oneself with, or committing oneself to, one's higher-order desires (1971: 16)—though this raises the further question of what it means to identify oneself with those desires, as well as whether it is possible to identify oneself with them inauthentically. I will put off answering that question until the next section, though. So we end up with the following as an account of the authentic self, with an unresolved question about what it means to exercise control authentically:

Authentic self: My authentic self is the part of me that is the product of when I exercised control over what made me who I am—and did so authentically.

I will turn now to authentic agency, in part to find out what it means to exert control over what one does in a way that is authentic.

II.2 Authentic agency

The recent literature on the topic of authentic agency has largely but not exclusively been concerned with ethics and moral responsibility (e.g. Varga 2012). While not always using the term 'authenticity', philosophers have nonetheless argued that some deep aspects of the self have a particular bearing on matters of someone's agency, and particularly their moral responsibility. According to one popular view (sometimes termed the 'deep self' or 'real self' view), we can be morally responsible only for those actions that emanate in some special way from the deep self (Wolf 1990; Sripada 2016).[6] The jury is out on exactly what parts of the self count as deep or real. One widely accepted view is that it is the self's moral values and commitments (Mogensen 2017). This view has had some empirical support from Strohminger and Nichols (2014), who found over a series of experimental studies that people generally take moral characteristics to be central to a person's self-identity.

An exception to this focus on ethics is Paul (2014, 2015), who argues that authenticity is an important value to reflect in our decision-making in general. For Paul, authenticity is, roughly speaking, the value of being personally invested in our decisions. It involves deliberating on what it would be like for me to undergo a certain experience and using my deliberations to guide my choices; it is important, Paul argues, because my choices should be a reflection of who I am as a person and what I value in life—especially for my big life decisions. Paul (2014: 127) writes that to choose authentically is

> '…to choose in a way that is true to ourselves, in a way that involves our *self* as a reflective, deliberating person. It is natural to think of our point of view and our subjective perspective on the future as a defining feature of who we are, where we have control and authority over who we are by making choices that determine what our futures will be like.'

It is important, she argues, because it allows us to maintain control and authority over the path our lives take: 'the ideal of self-realization through choice and control of our subjective futures' (2014: 111) is lost if we surrender control to someone else, even if they have a better idea of what's best for us.

To bring out this intuition, imagine that you are accompanied wherever you go by a perfect chooser, who always knows the choice that maximises your expected utility and communicates it to you by a hidden earpiece. Whenever you need to make a decision, the perfect chooser will tell you directly what they think is best, so you would always have a very good sense of what is rational to choose. If living a good life is all about maximizing utility, you would have a very good life.[7]

[6] Wolf (1990) adds that we can only be responsible for something that expresses some aspects of ourselves when we have control over those aspects (c.f. Smith 2008).

[7] Skarsaune (2016) and Bloom and Paul (2022) discuss similar cases.

However, this does not seem like a good way to live. Someone who chooses whether to have a baby, or leave their partner, or accept a marriage proposal, or change country just because they were told to do so by the perfect chooser, is someone who seems to lack a full engagement with their own life. Living an authentic life seems at minimum to require a deep engagement with important life decisions, to grapple with them and imagine what it would be like to undergo them. And someone who did fully engage with those decisions and imagine what it would be like to do those things, but then put all that aside to always defer to the perfect chooser, would enact a deep dissonance between their feelings and their behaviours. In a sense, none of their actions would ever be *their own*, something they can truly put themselves behind as an expression of their own will. This criticism is not that they will not lead a life that maximises utility, but that there is a deeper sense in which their life would not be fulfilling. Of course, no one does always choose this way, and (as I will argue more below) it is sometimes good to entrust our important decisions to those around us. But this nonetheless shows that there is a value, in our decision-making, to (in the words of Paul) 'choose in a way that is true to ourselves, in a way that involves our *self* as a reflective, deliberating person' (2014: 127). So not only do we need to reflect upon what it would be like to undergo the experiences we choose, but in many cases—particularly those choices that are significant, within our particular culture, for marking out who we are and what we stand for most deeply and fundamentally—we need to make those reflections central to our choice.

Note that none of the discussion in this section so far precludes the possibility that the self we express is shaped or partially constituted by the communities in which we are embedded. If our self is shaped or constituted by our communities, then by deeply reflecting upon and realizing our self in our actions, we will thereby express our relationships with our communities and the ways in which they have shaped us.

Based on this, we may try to formulate a criterion for authentic agency as follows:

**Authentic agency:* I exercise my agency authentically only if what I do expresses my self.

But this isn't quite right. One thing missed so far in the discussion is that it matters whether the self being expressed is authentic or not. To bring this out, consider Hana once again. Suppose, years down the line, she faces the opportunity to leave her husband and escape the abusive situation. She wants to make an authentic choice: she finally has a chance to act on her own terms. But she feels stuck. She feels she has no basis on which to make a choice on her own terms. Her self, even at its deepest, is not authentic; its valuation system is not her own. It is what her abusers made it into. Because she lacked a personal investment in the decisions that made her who she is, her actions, and the values and personality they gave her, do not reflect upon her, but

upon her abusers and what they chose for her. Bauer (2017), following Taylor (1976), argues that an important aspect of authenticity is taking responsibility for one's own self and one's evaluations: being able to stand behind, as it were, what one stands for. Because for many years Hana lacked control over the development of her own values and personal commitments, she feels she has no ownership of them now.

A deep-self theorist may say 'look deeper! Find a true self below all the layers of other people's values!' but this profoundly misses what a lack of control does to the self. As I argued above, it subtracts as well as adds. Transformative experiences leave one a new person; sometimes, we may find there is nothing left of who we used to be. Even if we remembered everything and could put ourselves in the shoes of our younger self, those values and feelings are no longer our own. Hana cannot choose authentically just by thinking about what her younger self would do—she's a different person now, and it would not be authentic to choose on the basis of values she once possessed but does no longer.[8] This makes it challenging—if not impossible—for her to make an authentic decision. To exercise our agency authentically, we need to find some scrap of authentic self remaining, and ground our decisions in that. If there is no scrap left, then we cannot exercise our agency authentically.

Authentic agency: I exercise my agency authentically only if what I do expresses my *authentic self*.

This means that there is a dependency between *authentic agency* and *authentic self*. Without an authentic self, one cannot make authentic decisions. And without making authentic decisions, one cannot have an authentic self. This dependency is not vicious, and it is compatible with us making authentic decisions and being our authentic selves, as long as, in media res, we already possess an authentic self.

III. A paradox of authenticity

The concern that this dependency between *authentic agency* and *authentic self* raises is that we may never be able to develop authentic selves in the first place. *Development*, one of the two processes discussed in Section I by which we become who we are, suggests that we do not begin our lives as *authentic selves*, since at that time we are fully dependent on others. At a fairly young age, children develop the capacity to exercise control over some of the key life events that make them who they become. Decisions about whom to make friends with, what role models to follow, whether to break the rules, etc., are all transformative decisions for young children, and they are decisions about which the child is often in a position to exercise control (even if they cannot

[8]Similar points are made by Mele (1995) and Haji (1998).

accurately predict or control what will happen as a result—but then, neither can adults much of the time). However, by the point they acquire that capacity, their preferences and values will nonetheless reflect their upbringing, rather than being the result of a prior exercise of *authentic agency*. But if children do not begin their lives as authentic selves, then there is no way that they can exercise authentic agency, as I argued above. This has the unpalatable implication that a child can never develop an authentic self—because developing an authentic self requires the prior exercise of authentic agency.

One may wonder if the child's authentic self could instead be identified with their innate features and dispositions. But this does no better: these too are arbitrary and unchosen, and so it is not clear why we should seek to express them in our decision-making, nor why we should respect them as we shape who we become. One may feel just as profound a disconnect with the properties imposed by nature as those imposed by humans (we do not want, as Buss (2012: 648) puts it, to be 'mere creatures of instinct').

Not only that, but even if children did somehow begin with an *authentic self*, very young children do not make decisions in the reflective, evaluative style suggested by Paul and others as necessary for *authentic agency*, but instead seek to copy their surroundings in a process of social learning (Bandura 1971). Coupled with the notion that childhood is a continuous series of transformative experiences—one doesn't know what it is like to be seven when one is six—this suggests that any initial flowerings of *authentic self* in the Heideggerian sense will swiftly be subtracted away, for most children, through the transformative influence of socially controlled events. That is not to say that the child, through their decisions and experiences, will not develop a unique personality and set of values. Instead, it is to note that these values and characteristics would not be authentic, according to this picture.

What has gone wrong here? Undoubtedly something has, since if the above is true, then none of us can ever have authentic selves. If at any point we are not an authentic self, then we can never become one. After all, we would need to have previously exercised authentic agency in our lives to have an authentic self. But if we don't have an authentic self, then we cannot exercise authentic agency. Even incremental steps in developing authenticity are out of the picture, since for even the most minor step toward either authentic self or authentic agency, one needs some of the other—but that is precisely what we lack.

I suggest that the paradox[9] has formed because of an overly individualistic conception of the self. If a child's authentic self is social, largely constituted

[9]One may be inclined to take this argument to be a reductio ad absurdum of the notion of authenticity, rather than a paradox. Some authors are skeptical that the notion of authenticity deserves a place in our moral vocabulary (e.g. Mogensen 2017; 2021). I do not find this perspective plausible. But if one is sympathetic to this idea, then that simply changes the character of my conclusion. While still establishing that defenders of authenticity must assume a social self, this

by those around them, then they can exercise their agency authentically precisely by relying on those others as they make their decisions, because it is by that that their authentic selves become 'objectified in action', to quote Dewey (1891: 161). Hana's bonds with her abusive family are likely so corrupted as to preclude any of them entering her authentic self, but the friendship with the case worker who is supporting her escape may provide the shred of authenticity that allows her, by mutually reflecting on and thinking through her options together with her friend (by now a constitutive part of her own self), authentically to leave her controlling environment. In general, a social view of the self is open to the possibility that we begin our lives with the capability of exercising *authentic agency*, by reflecting the loving, trusting relationships that we are embedded in and dependent upon in our actions. Then, even if later in life we lose our authentic self, as Hana did, we can still build it back again by thinking through our options with our friends or community, exercising our agency authentically through our reliance on them. I will say more about this idea of social self in just a moment, and how it relates to the ideas already discussed in this paper. Here, my aim is just to note that the paradox only gets off the ground if one assumes the following:

Individualist self: the self is something distinctly individual, perhaps shaped by other people, but not ontologically constituted by any other person.

If we reject this assumption, then it is possible for someone to have an authentic self. Since I take it for granted that at least some people do have authentic selves, I do reject this assumption. The task now falls on me to present an alternative view of the self that is coherent and escapes the paradox.

IV. Individualist and social selves

Before presenting an account of the social self, let me briefly note that the individualist self is not a straw self. It is more often assumed than defended, but while I suspect that some discussions of authenticity could survive more or less unscathed without that assumption (e.g. Taylor 1992), for others, it plays an essential role.

Let me focus again on Paul (2014). For Paul, the self is the locus of first personal experience (c.f. Zahavi 2017). Accordingly, Paul places special emphasis on the role of first personal reflection in authentic choice. On this account, an authentic decision involves first-personally deliberating on how it would feel for me to undergo a certain experience, and using those first-personal deliberations to guide my choices; this is important, Paul argues, because my choices should be a reflection of who I am as a person and what I value in life—

will provide support for the notion of a social self only to the extent that one finds the notion of authenticity independently plausible.

especially for big life decisions, like coming out, choosing a career, or having a child (Paul 2014: 109):

> 'What you care about, when making a decision about your own personal future, is not the third personal descriptive knowledge that you will have certain properties in the future, but your experience-based first personal knowledge of what it will be like for you to have these properties. In other words, you care about what it will be like for *you* to experience *your* future, because you want to determine *your* preferences in terms of *your* expected subjective values.'

Paul's emphasis on first-personal experience becomes especially salient in her discussion of transformative decisions—decisions that result in experiences that are both epistemically transformative (we learn something about what it is like to undergo them that we could not have known before) and personally transformative (by undergoing them, our core values and preferences change). A paradigmatic example of a transformative decision is the decision of whether to become a parent. Many people claim on becoming parents that nothing they were told in advance fully prepared them for the experience of what it is like actually to be one. And sometimes they find that the experience has changed them, such that things they could never imagine liking suddenly become very enjoyable, and vice versa. How should we make such a decision?

According to standard normative theories of rational choice, the answer depends upon the expected utilities we assign to the different options. But when we are facing a transformative decision, this puts us in a bind. We are choosing based on what it is like to experience things we have never experienced, for a future self whose preferences may be completely different to those we have at present. Our first-personal reflections on what it would be like to undergo that experience are thus likely to be of little evidential value. We could alternatively rely on the testimony of others to guide us: if, when faced with the decision of whether to have a child, I am told by my trusted friends and family that they are overwhelmingly glad they did so, that may provide me with strong evidence that choosing to have a child would be the right choice. But setting aside my first-personal reflection to base my decision on such testimony would involve sacrificing authenticity in our decision-making, Paul argues. It is because of this that transformative decisions leave us in a 'Sartrean dilemma: when making transformative choices, either choose authentically, or choose rationally' (Paul 2014: 112).

Paul's central philosophical problem in her discussion of transformative decisions thus only gets off the ground, at least for the central cases she describes, if one assumes an individualist self. If one rejects this idea, then expressing the self in who one is and what one does may involve not a retreat inward, toward first-personal reflection and imagination, but instead a step outward, toward one's trusted friends, family, mentors, heroes, role-models, etc.—the other people who make up one's self. If authenticity permits the reliance on

the testimony of others, then the 'Sartrean dilemma' largely dissolves for the everyday cases that give the philosophical problem its great urgency—having a child, making a career decision, coming out, etc. If the problem remains, it is for situations where not even the testimony of trusted others will help us: choosing whether to be the first person in one's community to attend college, or the first human to emigrate to another planet, or (Paul's preferred example) whether to become a vampire.

In contrast to an individualist self, a social self is partly constituted by other people. There are several kinds of social self that have been proposed in recent years. One, by Heersmink (2018), extends Schechtman's (1996) theory of the narrative self to argue that the self is interwoven with both evocative objects and other people. Another, by Deguchi (2022), draws from the ideas of Dōgen and other Zen philosophers to argue that self as the subject of action is best understood as a multi-agent system. Everything we do, Deguchi argues, involves some degree of reliance on other agents, depending on our capabilities, and thus whenever we act, we are in effect 'delegating agency' to other members of that system. For example, when we open a bank account or buy a sandwich, we are delegating agency to the bank clerk or the store worker to complete the action. According to this picture, any action becomes 'a joint action by countless agents, including myself, who were entrusted with agency by me and as a result shared it' (Deguchi 2022). Deguchi suggests that the self, as the doer of actions, should thus be understood as a 'we', rather than an 'I'. The relationships we have with those around us—reflecting our complex histories and affective attitudes towards them, including trust and reliance—are reflected in the multi-agent system this 'we' captures.

I argued above that acting authentically involves reflecting the self in what we do, and exercising control authentically over who we become. But if the self is social, how do we go about doing this? If the account is too permissive, then it would undermine what makes authenticity such an appealing ideal for many—the idea that we should not let ourselves be shaped by those around us (in what we do or who we are), but instead actively shape our own lives. In the case of Hana, for example, I wrote that it would be inauthentic for her to reflect the desires of her abusive family in what she does or who she becomes, because this would involve surrendering control over the shape of her life. At the same time, the social self view implies that it can sometimes be authentic to let ourselves be shaped by our friends or community and to reflect their values and commitments in our actions. When would this be the case?

I suggest that the key to resolving this tension lies in recognizing that sometimes the only way to exercise control over the shape of our lives and what we do is to let ourselves be shaped by others, and to reflect their values and commitments in our actions. Recent discussions under the label of relational autonomy have identified a range of ways in which exercising self-governance requires relying on those around us. According to Westlund (2012: 59),

'autonomy must itself be understood to be a relational capacity… [it] is not only *compatible* with human embeddedness in social and personal relationships, but in some important respects *depends* on these relationships'. Take someone incapacitated by mental illness, for example. The options available to her, and her ability to choose between them in ways that reflect both her wellbeing and the shape she wants to give to her life, will depend heavily on her carers and the broader social structures of caregiving that she has access to. Attempting to choose without this support could, conversely, undermine her autonomy. Philosophers differ on the necessary conditions for autonomy, but this argument is robust across a range of accounts: she may lack a sufficient 'variety of acceptable alternatives… [that she can pursue] without undue social or psychological cost' (Oshana 1998: 93); she may lack the 'socially structured authority to stand by' what she does and thus claim the 'authority to speak for [her] intentions and conduct' (Benson 2005: 108 and 102); and she may, like Frankfurt's (1971: 12) unwilling addict, find herself 'helplessly violated by [her] own desires'. Her autonomy, then, is something that arises out of reliance on others, rather than in spite of it.

But even for non-incapacitated, non-disabled adults, much of their ability to exercise control over their lives depends on the help and involvement of those around them. As Nedelsky (1989: 12) writes, 'if we ask ourselves what actually enables people to be autonomous, the answer is not isolation, but relationships—with parents, teachers, friends, loved ones'. Indeed, read another way, Paul's problem of transformative decision-making demonstrates that to act rationally when faced with the option of choosing something transformative is precisely *to rely* on certain others—to let them into our decision-making, as participants who share a concern not only for our welfare but also for the shape we want to give our life (indeed, as *development* shows, these others may have played important roles in bringing about the values and commitments that led us to seek to shape our life this way). Someone who chooses to have a child or pursue a particular career without relying, as she makes her decision, on others who have gone before her—not just as providers of information, but also so that their transformed values and understanding can guide her in how to weigh the importance of the information she receives—is not exercising control over the shape of her life, nor reflecting anything of her authentic self in that decision. By contrast, someone who relies on trusted others to help her make these choices *can* exercise control over what kind of person she becomes, even if she does not know in advance what it will feel like to become such a person, because she has access to enough knowledge to understand the transformation she will undergo and how she will likely feel about it; she can make a rational decision and stand behind it as her own.

On the social self view, the self is thus not at its most authentic when the individual looks inward and reflects first-personally on what to do (c.f. Paul 2014). Instead, making authentic decisions as someone who is reliant on

others, aware of our incapabilities, but also in relationships of trust and care with those around us, means engaging with others—the others around us who support us, in whose lives we are embedded, who constitute our community.

The ways in which we should involve others, if we are to exercise agency authentically, will depend on the nature of the relationships we have with them. In deciding when and how to escape from her abusive family, Hana will draw both from her friend the social worker and from members of her family, but in very different ways. She will talk to her friend to think through the implications of her decision and to work out if it really is the best thing for her to do, given the risks and costs as well as the potential upsides—by doing so, she retains (or rather, regains) control over the shape her life will take. She will not reveal her thoughts to her family nor involve them as trusted co-participants in her decision-making, however, because that would undermine her ability to exercise control: as Buss and Westlund (2018) write, 'other agents can prevent someone's reasoning from qualifying as a mode of self-government by preventing the reasoner from developing the self-respect and/or self-trust necessary for forming a point of view that is truly her own'. Hana's family are paradigmatic examples of such agents. Nonetheless, she may talk to her family to gain information on their plans and whereabouts in order to plan her escape—as well as, perhaps, to work through what her feelings toward them really are.

Conceptualizing the self as a multi-agent system explains why it is authentic for young children to rely on their caregivers for governing the direction of their lives, while it is less authentic for a capable adult to rely on others in the same way. The relationship young children have with their caregivers is one of complete dependence and trust toward them, reciprocated in the love, care, and responsibility that caregivers have to their charges. An authentic decision, for a young child, will recognize and express this relationship, as will the process of social learning by which children develop the characteristics that make them who they become. As children go about making friends, following or breaking rules, and engaging with their learning environment, they are exercising their agency authentically by expressing these relationships with the world around them, even if their behaviour is largely copied and their values uncritically inherited. It is in this way that children develop and exercise their human capacities for rational action.

As children get older, however, they will usually develop greater capabilities to act independently and will change the relationships they have with others to reflect that. The relationships that fully capable adults have with their peers are of a very different nature to the relationship a young child has to his carers, involving greater equality and mutuality, even in very hierarchical relationships. A fully capable adult who continues to rely on others in the same uncritical, dependent way that a young child relies on his parents will not be expressing her social self—in which all these relationships and capabilities are subsumed—authentically. To generalize, our appropriate

reliance changes depending on our capabilities. Where we have few, we should largely rely on others. Where we have many, we should rely less, but we cannot avoid relying on others to some extent.

Compared to Paul's (2014) individualistic account of authenticity, this picture fits better with what in practice people take to be good, healthy decision-making behaviours. Paul characterises an authentic decision as one that is characterised primarily by introspection and personal reflection. But in practice, when making important decisions, we do so by relying in part on others, as advisors, co-deciders, and confidantes. It is a deeply important part of how we ordinarily make important decisions that we talk them over or think them through with people we trust, or look to them for guidance or leadership. As *agency* recognizes, the lives we lead are thoroughly entangled with those around us. When we take their advice into account, or follow their example, the value of doing so lies in that they are part of 'us'. Not only do the comparatively social decision-making practices I describe affirm the value of this 'we' when we rely on those we trust, but 'we'—that is, our community or partnership of trust—become invested in the decision, and the decision reflects back upon 'us', not just the individual who made the choice. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child—but a well-raised child also reflects back positively on the village.

Paul (2014) treats the advice and testimony of others as having mere epistemic value. But when we listen to and follow in the footsteps of those we trust, the value of doing so is not merely epistemic. We do not just add their testimony to the evidence bank that we consult when we make a decision. Instead, by integrating them into our decisions, we reflect ourselves. Recall Deguchi's (2022: 10) example of the head of an organization, who 'makes the final decision after deliberations and decisions in various departments'. The head of an organization does not just draw from the deliberations and decisions of various departments because that provides her with better information about what the most rational decision would be, but also because doing so reflects what kind of organization they are, what kind of relationships the employees have with each other, and what kind of leader she is.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to clarify some of the basic commitments that accounts of authenticity must make. From this minimal statement of what authenticity involves—as applied to both agency and the self—I develop a paradox that calls into question the possibility of ever leading an authentic life. The paradox only holds if one assumes an individualist self, however. While this is an assumption made by many philosophers, including many of those working on authenticity, I draw on Deguchi's notion of Self-as-We to

argue that if the self is instead something inherently social (a 'we' not an 'I') the paradox dissolves. This provides support for the social self view and also shows how accounts of authenticity can withstand criticisms of being overly individualistic and inward-focused (e.g. Mogensen 2017; Dover 2023).[10]

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[10]For helpful comments and discussion, I am grateful to Amy Sepinwall, Alan Morrison, Laurie Paul, Yasuo Deguchi, Asia Sakchatchawan, Felipe Cuervo Restrepo, Jacob Mortimer, Jenny Hung, Santiago Mejia, two anonymous reviewers for this journal, and participants in the SACP panel at the Eastern APA 2024.

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