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Assessing Enhancement Technologies: Authenticity as a Social Virtue and Experiment

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This paper argues for a revised concept of authenticity entailing two demands that must be balanced. The first demand moves authenticity from the position of a strictly self-regarding virtue towards the position of a fully social virtue, acknowledging the crucial feature of steadiness, i.e. self-consistency, as being precisely what we ‘naturally’ lack (Williams). Nevertheless, the value of personal authenticity in a modern, open society comes from the fact that it brings about not only steadiness, but also the public development of a variety of existential options that can be understood as Millian ‘original experiments in living’. Thus the second demand of authenticity is a demand for ‘experimental’ authenticity which covers the whole spectrum of technologies of the self, from Nietzschean ‘brief habits’, to the use of enhancement technologies.

Keywords: authenticity, enhancement technologies, originality, steadiness, commitment, experiments in living

# Introduction

During the last two decades, the issue of personal authenticity has been raised in direct connection with the moral permissibility of enhancement technologies. ‘One of the common worries about enhancement technologies is that they threaten the authenticity of the agent using them’ (Levy 2011, p. 308). This bioconservative argument (President’s Council on Bioethics 2003, pp. 250-253; Elliott 1998) was initially challenged by distinguishing two conceptions of authenticity: the discovery and expression of my true, enduring essence, and Sartrian self-creation. Nothing prohibits us, in the second case, to regard an enhancement technology as an ‘authentic piece of self-creation’ (Degrazia 2000, p. 35). Further, Neil Levy has argued that even the essentialist conception of authenticity could support the use of some enhancement technologies as ways to make my external appearance the mirror of my alleged ‘inner’ self (2011, p. 316).[[1]](#footnote-1)

In modern times, most philosophers accept the co-existence of two distinct views of authenticity: an *essentialist* understanding of authenticity, and an *existentialist* one, the general idea being that the first view entails ‘self-discovery’, whereas the latter rejects any essential notion of the ‘true self’ and focuses on ‘self-creation’.

In this paper, I first challenge the sharp demarcation between philosophical conceptions of self-discovery and those of self-creation. In brief, ‘romantic authenticity’ (which is the major source for contemporary essentialist views) entailing the re-discovery of ‘naturalness’ within ourselves has always involved a process of (poetic) creation, as shown by Taylor (1989; 1992), whereas the existentialist accounts of authentic ‘self-choosing’ (Kierkegaard 1849; Heidegger 1927; Sartre 1943) haven’t been able to avoid the key reference to the idea of a revealing origin, an original self, and an original choice disclosing itself. I argue instead that the more relevant distinction is between pre-reflective authenticity (involving spontaneity, lack of inhibitions, blunt sincerity) and reflective (and thus committed) authenticity. I also show how my revised conception of authenticity preserves the important features of both the essentialist and the existentialist views.

On the one hand, I shall argue, in the footsteps of Williams (2002), that *steadiness* is the thing most desired by the proponents of ‘self-discovery’ views of authenticity. ‘Being yourself’ is actually valued inasmuch as it entails steadiness in attitudes, expressed beliefs and conduct, making it possible to be identified as *this* kind of person. Yet, this steadiness is something that is only acquired through social interactions, and not something that could be ‘naturally’ possessed by an individual.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is certainly true that social conformism generates in its turn *reliability*, a key ingredient for cooperation. However, a modern, liberal, open society cannot rely solely on the steadiness ensured through norms of social conformism. Authenticity involves not only steadiness, but also the opportunity to explore a variety of existential possibilities conceivable either as cultural and historical ‘heritage’, following Heidegger (1927), or as ‘original experiments in living’ that are quite necessary for social and moral progress, following Mill (1859).

On the other hand, it is clear that the ‘essence’ of the existentialist stance on authenticity lies in projectivity and *self-choosing*, while also recognizing the importance of self-consistency over time. Self-choosing needs commitment, but the important thing is to detach the idea of self-choosing from any secular version of Christian *metanoia* or spiritual conversion that would entail the acknowledgment of a unique and final life resolution. On the contrary, I argue that it is only through the inclusion of variation and experimentation with oneself in our search for authenticity that we are becoming able to speak *retrospectively* about our ‘true’ projective self and tested beliefs and values. At this stage, there seems to be no *a priori* reason to exclude new technologies that could enhance and promote personal autonomy from the spectrum of agreed ‘technologies of the self’, given that they expand the field of possibilities of choosing oneself for a human being finding itself ‘thrown’ into the world.

Although it may seem to go against the way we usually understand the term ‘authenticity’ (speaking of ‘self-experiments’ would be the exact opposite to the authentic ‘naturalness’, the peak of artificiality, etc.), my claim is that this revised notion actually preserves both the key feature of the ‘self-creation’ concept, and the ‘getting in touch with your nature’ side of authenticity. Therefore, I think we might have found a way for balancing what I refer to, drawing on Larmore (2010), as being the two poles of modern authenticity: *passion* and *commitment*. The ‘naturalness’ entails passion (or to put it in a Romantic sentence: Nature speaks to us through our deep passions). And it is true that ‘brief habits’ (Nietzsche 1882) are instilled and ‘new and original experiments in living’ (Mill 1859) are conducted in a passionate search, not ‘mechanically’. We become passionate about the enhancement of our natural traits, and this passion is itself the mark of our self-transcending nature. At the same time, practical reflection about alternatives or ‘factical possibilities’ of existence (Heidegger 1927) entails existential commitment, and this kind of resoluteness or projectivity is the thing we preserve from the existentialist perspective.

Finally, it is through the combination of the social and the experimental demand for authenticity that we find a balance in regulating the human enhancement technologies, on the one hand limiting self-experiments to those publicly endorsed (but first of all, endorsed by our significant others and critical friends, not by ‘Anyone’), and on the other, preventing our identity patterns from becoming merely an expression of social conformism.

# Two authenticities?

Is there such a thing as a pre-reflective authenticity? Or is there any other kind, apart from the pre-reflective one? The modern obsession of ‘being yourself’, that many theorists consider to be the very mark of the prevailing individualism of the western world, involves the idea of *originality* as something to be highly valued. But originality itself might involve the quest for one’s ‘roots’ and true origin, *i.e.* an essential or fundamental sense of an individual’s identity that has to be discovered and expressed as such, or it may simply refer to the quality of novelty, of freshness, of independence.

It has been rightfully argued that the practice of self-creation cannot be excluded *a priori* from an understanding of personal authenticity as harmony between inner self and public display or external appearance.[[3]](#footnote-3) But the same seems to be the case with the idea of self-discovery, that is of an ‘origin’ revealing itself, when we pay close attention to the existentialist notion of authenticity. This is why genetic enhancements can be presented as ways of positively altering what Heidegger (1927) has called ‘facticity’, and thus increasing the capacities for self-determination.[[4]](#footnote-4) The point I wish to make is that the existentialists have focused on self-creation, but they have never been able to abandon, when discussing the ideal of authenticity, the key reference to *origin* and an original self. In Kierkegaard’s view (1980 [1849], p. 30; p. 36), the process of becoming oneself must involve an effort of taking distance from oneself, of ‘moving away’, but only to realize ‘an infinite coming back to itself’ and thus embrace that self you were destined to be. For Heidegger (2001 [1927], pp. 437-439), the authentic projection of oneself towards the future holds its roots in an authentic understanding of one’s historical *heritage*. As for Sartre (1993 [1943], pp. 462-465; p. 479), his entire work exposes an unsolved ‘antinomy of freedom’: on the one side, he focuses on the necessity of change and the negative meaning of an act of freedom as ‘negation’ of the previous ones; but on the other hand, all my free acts must be ‘integrated to a fundamental project, an original choice which is one and the same’ (Wahl 1948, p. 547).

But what about explicit ‘self-discovery’ views of authenticity? As mentioned above, we encounter the same difficulty when it comes to drawing a clear distinction between ‘self-discovery’ and ‘self-creation’. Let’s take the case of Romanticism (including the pre-Romantic Herder), the main source of inspiration for contemporary ‘essentialist’ views of authenticity, if we are to follow Taylor’s reading. Romantic ‘naturalness’ is something that has to be expressed, in a way that is usually linked to poetic *creation*. Being authentic means ‘being true to my own originality’ (Taylor 1992, p. 29), according to this view, but it is the striving for self-expression that gives my own self ‘a definitive shape’ (Taylor 1989, p. 375). So we can state that 19th century Romanticism regards artistic creation as being ‘the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition’, holding as a general law that the self-discovery process ‘passes through a creation’, being practically synonymous with ‘the making of something original and new’ (Taylor 1992, p. 62).

So it seems like both Romantic and existentialist views of authenticity involve some kind of blending or oscillation between the pole of discovery and that of creation. This is the main reason for paying more attention to the pre-reflective/reflective distinction than to the common self-discovery/self-creation distinction.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This change of perspective, partially inspired by Larmore (2010), allows us to shed more light on the two poles of modern authenticity. On the one hand, we have (pre-reflective) *passion* as an expression of ‘being natural,’ of this ‘naturalness’ (*le naturel*) so highly praised in Romanticism.[[6]](#footnote-6) On the other hand, we have existential *commitment* as a fruit of practical reflection or ‘anticipatory resoluteness’, as Heidegger (2001 [1927], p. 351) called it. The harsh criticism of authenticity usually targets one *or* the other of these different understandings, and is often implicitly advanced *on behalf of the other understanding*. People who seem to live under the influence of momentary passions are accused of inconsistency, lack of seriousness, shallowness. We are told that they don’t know what they ‘truly’ want, and that they are inauthentic because they seem deeply unstable. Conversely, people who manifest a life discipline, steadiness, unshakeable firmness of convictions, are regarded by the ‘passionate’ ones as inauthentic persons, because they seem to lack spontaneity, struggling to impose an artificial unity or order in their existence, at the price of so many renunciations, of silencing so many impulses or inner voices.

We cannot abandon the Romantic ‘naturalness’ for the sake of a theory focused solely on projectivity or commitment without depriving ourselves of a basic justification for choosing a project or having a particular commitment: ‘it expresses my personality’, ‘it is most my own’, ‘I recognize myself in this’. So a better alternative is to articulate a conception of authenticity that tries to balance spontaneity and reflection, passion and commitment. But at this stage, we should take into consideration another decisive aspect. In any of its uses, being ‘authentic’ is not a normatively neutral description of conduct: it is a positive *evaluation* of it made by oneself or others. Moreover, authenticity is, as we shall see, a value of independence inasmuch as it is a social expectancy.

Let us imagine that Salvador Dalí does exactly what he feels like and he is in complete agreement with his ‘avidity for dollars’ (according to the notorious anagram coined by André Breton: ‘Salvador Dali = Avida Dollars’) when he agrees to sign a number of fake Dalí paintings for a large sum of money. Is Dalí an ‘authentic’ artist for this precise gesture? At the opposite pole, let’s take the horrifying case of an ISIS suicide bomber: is he an ‘authentic’ individual, or rather brainwashed? As Guignon (2005, p. 81) argues, ‘the fact that we hesitate to apply the term “authentic” in these cases indicates that what is crucial about authenticity is not just the intensity of the commitment and fervor of the expression it carries with it, but the nature of the *content* of the commitment as well’.

Is it a realistic option to simply discard the idea of authenticity, as many Postmodernists have suggested? Authenticity remains a notion of vital importance at a personal level, in direct connection to the question of the meaning of life, as well as at a civic and political level.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nevertheless, in order to avoid both the pitfalls of marketed authenticity in pop culture or self-help literature, and the aporias of the concept of authenticity emphasized in existentialist philosophy, I wish to advance a revised concept of authenticity entailing two demands that are limiting one another and have to be balanced.

The first demand draws on Bernard Williams’s understanding of the modern idea of authenticity (2002) in the light of the ancient notion of virtue (2006), while the other one builds on Nietzsche’s clues (1882) about self-creation. In the next section, I will focus on shifting authenticity from the position of a strictly self-regarding virtue towards the position of a fully social virtue. I shall later argue that the first demand functions as a limit preventing authenticity from becoming a never-ending and exhausting search for novelty, while the second one prevents the social demand for authenticity from being paradoxically leveled to ‘bad faith’ or ‘inauthenticity’ according to the existentialist vulgate.

# Authenticity as a social virtue: from significant others to the ‘Anyone’ and back

In the cult movie *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979) there is a famous scene where Brian, being treated by the crowd as the Messiah despite his denials, unsuccessfully tries to inculcate in his followers the value of independent thinking:

BRIAN: Look. You’ve got it all wrong. You don’t need to follow me. You don’t need to follow anybody! You’ve got to think for yourselves. You’re all individuals!

FOLLOWERS: Yes, we’re all individuals!

BRIAN: You’re all different!

FOLLOWERS: Yes, we are all different!

DENNIS: I’m not.

ARTHUR: Shhhh.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In a social context where everybody is unreflectively claiming to be independent and unique, the only authentic expression of individuality that is left seems to be one that is acknowledging the genuine desire ‘to be like everyone else’. It can be argued that such a paradox lies at the heart of any attempt to shape a notion of authenticity that balances the expression (or the creation) of individuality with the need for its social validation. Nevertheless, the general tendency has always been to assume that being authentic means being ‘your own self’ in a way that is not contaminated by external influences, by the pressures of the social environment, and that authenticity involves the capacity to think and act ‘using your own mind’.

The problem is not that such a view would be totally wrong, but that it misses the crucial fact that *any* possibility of self-choice is socially preformed: ‘we need to see that our identity-conferring identifications are drawn from, and are answerable to, the shared historical commitments and ideals that make up our communal life-world’ (Guignon 2005, p. 79; see also Taylor 1992, pp. 37-41).

This is a familiar communitarian argument. However, a similar conclusion may be reached if we start by just paying attention to the way we use key words such as ‘attitude’ or ‘belief’: it is clear that the very meaning of these terms entails the idea of *steadiness*, as argued by Williams (2002, pp. 191-205). And yet, this steadiness is precisely what we lack in a so-called ‘natural state’: our minds are continuously shifting, following different feelings, impressions, passions that come and go. The thing that Diderot seems to have understood a lot better than his influential contemporary Rousseau is that sincere introspection is not enough for ‘steadying the mind’ (Williams 2002, p. 191) and thus acquiring what shall be later called ‘authenticity’. It is only by constantly interacting with other people that we acquire this valued steadiness. Thus, personal identity is also a product of social cooperation:

The basic mechanism depends on the fact that there are others who need to rely on our dispositions, and we want them to be able to rely on our dispositions because we, up to a point, want to rely on theirs. (Williams 2002, p. 192)[[9]](#footnote-9)

Drawn to … make my own beliefs and feelings steadier (to make them, at the limit, for the first time into beliefs), I become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely profess … or perhaps I become my interpretation of their interpretation of what I have sincerely declared to them. (Williams 2002, p. 204)

Should this situation force us into thinking that the ideal of authenticity is merely an illusion, and that there is nothing to be *discovered* about who we ‘really’ are? Williams wasn’t embracing a strictly social constructivist view, and neither do I. This inescapable relationship to others doesn’t automatically mean surrendering to ‘the dictatorship of the Anyone’ (Heidegger’s *das Man*) or simply caving in to the latest trend. Instead, it requires us to re-think authenticity as a *social virtue*.

I suggest a two-step approach, the first inspired by Williams, while the second draws its inspiration from an argument advanced by thinkers such as MacIntyre and Taylor.

Williams has brilliantly argued against a common objection to virtue ethics, according to which this would be too ‘self-centered’ to count as a viable option in the modern world, by claiming that

the trouble with cultivating the virtues, if it is seen as a first-personal and deliberative exercise, is rather that your thought is not self-directed enough. Thinking about your possible states in terms of the virtues … is rather to think about the way in which others might describe or comment on the way in which you think about your actions. (Williams 2006, p. 11)

We might then distinguish between virtues whose exercise has a direct effect on others (like ‘generosity’ or ‘gentleness’) and self-regarding virtues that hold only an indirect effect on others (let’s say ‘temperance’ or ‘courage’). As to the question of authenticity, my claim is that it is *social* not only in the sense of being an evaluation of conduct made from a second person perspective, but also in the sense of being a social *expectation*, or at least a modern social expectation.

It is of course true that social conformism also involves the key ingredient of *reliability* emphasized by Williams. But personal authenticity, in a modern, open society, brings about not only (a kind of) steadiness, but also the virtue of *variety*, because it entails the public display of a variety of existential options that we find ourselves exposed to.[[10]](#footnote-10) We may understand these options either as historical and ‘factical possibilities’ of existence taken up by our fellows as ‘heritage’ (Heidegger 2001 [1927], p. 435), or as ‘the trial of new and original experiments in living’ (Mill 2003 [1859], p. 95).

So both the pre-reflective and the existentialist meaning of authenticity bear an undeniable social print. We are being constrained to hold on to identity patterns before or even without becoming conscious of this. Also, the existential commitments that we take on during our lives are not a matter of transcending the ‘herd’, but only a personal answer to what others expect from us.

The key question we have to ask at this point is the following: who are the others that help me stabilize my beliefs and finally shape my personal identity? The others are holding the scales for weighing the ‘quality’ of my very own search for authenticity, a search that combines self-discovery with self-invention, thus making them indistinguishable in the final form of a self.[[11]](#footnote-11) *But these others aren’t just anyone*: they are the ‘significant others’ (Taylor 1992, p. 33), or the ‘critical friends’ (MacIntyre 2009, p. 120) that help me to develop and steady my own mind through continuous *dialogical* exchanges. Or, in particular cases, those who, like myself, have undergone philosophical training that provided them with the conceptual tools necessary in order to analyze and criticize my attitudes, beliefs and general views.

# ‘Experimental’ Authenticity: from resoluteness to ‘brief habits’ and back

Unlike Rousseau or the Romanticists, existentialist thinkers have focused on a notion of authenticity conceived in terms of projectivity and commitment, being aware of the fact that there is something obviously contradictory in the obstinate striving for an authenticity conceived as pre-reflective ‘naturalness’: ‘By trying to be what we consider our natural self, we create within ourselves a “division of the subject” (as Valéry himself put it), since we must observe ourselves in order to verify that we are adhering to this ideal’ (Larmore 2010, 3).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Going instead for a practical and engaged reflexivity, existentialist philosophy has developed the topic of authenticity as a successor of the ancient philosophical goal of self-mastery coupled with the Christian-rooted belief in the unique value of a person. The German word *Eigentlichkeit* that English versions of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* translate as ‘authenticity’ literally entails the idea of self-possession or ‘self-enownment’ (Guignon 2005, 83).[[13]](#footnote-13) As Parens (2005, 35) puts it, ‘while the idea of authenticity has a complex history, the core of it is that we are authentic when we exhibit or are in possession of what is most our own.’

However, ‘self-enownment’ is also meant to be questioned in light of that ‘division of the subject’ entailed by reflexivity. Sartre’s point, according to Guignon (2005, 73-74), is that the human self is always fatally ‘bifurcated’ between two stances: ‘the self of transcendence’, that is the human free consciousness making decisions about how one’s life story should continue, and ‘the self of facticity’, which entails regarding yourself from a third-person perspective, as a character caught up ‘in a long history of decisions followed by relapses.’[[14]](#footnote-14)

The problem may lie in the fact that Heidegger has grounded his account of authenticity upon a highly arguable notion of ‘resoluteness’ (*Entschlossenheit*): a life decision which seems unique and final, coinciding with one’s acknowledgment of her ‘ownmost possibility of existence’ (Heidegger 2001 [1927], p. 334).[[15]](#footnote-15) Sartre (1943) agrees with Heidegger about the fact that the ‘original choice’ is something one has to continuously reiterate, while acknowledging that an individual has at any given moment the freedom to deny this choice and to go further by embarking on a new existential project.

At the opposite pole from Heidegger, we encounter Nietzsche, and his explicit invitation for each and every one of us to be our own ‘experiments and guinea pigs’ (1974 [1882], p. 253). Contrary to the Nazi’s atrocious experiments on human beings, the focus here is on personal autonomy and individual freedom of experimenting with oneself within a regulated framework. It is clear that this kind of radical existentialist view casts a rather favorable light even upon the voluntary use of powerful cognitive or mood enhancement drugs that are deemed to alter the very own convictions and plans of the current and the old ‘Me’. As Juth (2011, p. 43) puts it, ‘Radically changing one’s outlook on one’s life cannot in itself make the resulting outlook inauthentic. Otherwise the development of new outlooks would automatically make us inauthentic.’

We can set forth a twofold notion of ‘experimental’ authenticity. *Personal* experiments could involve traditional ‘techniques of the self’ with historical roots in Greek and Roman philosophy, such as ‘techniques of meditation, of memorization of the past, of examination of conscience**,** of checking representations which appear in the mind, and so on’ (Foucault 2005, p. 11). All of these are ultimately meant to alter individual behavior, to modify patterns of conduct or distinctive tics in a fully conscious manner. While this striving is inspired by the quest for human perfection and other ideals, we hold on to the practical and particular aim of improving the quality of daily existence. A central idea to Confucian ethics might also be integrated into this notion of ‘experimental’ authenticity: the ‘ritualization’ (in a very loose sense) of our daily acts. It is about breaking routines that don’t seem beneficial for us and the ones surrounding us, not by trying to be more spontaneous (that paradoxical striving for a pre-reflective authenticity), but by doing precisely the opposite: regarding our customary actions as de facto rituals that can be performed in a number of different ways (see Puett and Gross-Loh 2016, 28-45). We thus create a space for personal change to occur by starting with seemingly minor things (for instance, the way we greet people, the way we drink tea or have breakfast).

But are there definite good reasons for restraining the area of self-experimentation to these old techniques? The use of psychopharmaceuticals or even neurotechnologies such as DBS (in the case of otherwise treatment-resistant disorders) might be regarded as valid instances of ‘experimental’ authenticity: generally speaking, any kind of *reversible* technique, anything that allows a patient to experiment the effects of being on and off an administered drug or on and off stimulation through implanted electrodes (see Pugh *et al.* 2017; Nyholm and O’Neill 2017).

Questions remain, of course, about so-called ‘irreversible’ biomedical enhancements. The fear of unintended disastrous consequences is surely legitimate at this stage of genetic engineering, even after the CRISPR/Cas9 revolution in gene editing. There are different kinds of deep moral concerns raised by the application of genomic technologies to humans that I will not discuss in this paper. However, once we embrace a concept of authenticity which entails self-experiments, we can easily overcome the ‘authenticity’ objection against enhancement technologies. In this way, at least some of the possible genetic enhancements might be regarded as *social* experiments made in full acknowledgment of all the relevant scientific information and in conformity with due practice. Also, what is irreversible, on a personal scale, might be regarded as reversible on a social scale (through a change of public policies, experts’ recommendations, etc.) in the event of unpredicted bad consequences. Moreover, we should consider the technological possibilities of preventing particular genes from being expressed. We can conceive of such medical safety nets once we understand that a genetic change doesn’t automatically entail a phenotypic (trait) change (Buchanan 2017, p. 86). A new space for experimental variation is thus opening. But whether we speak of cognitive, physical, or moral bioenhancements, we should remain extremely careful when assessing the risks.

Returning to the general philosophical outlook on authenticity, I consider Nietzsche’s idea of ‘brief habits’ (a modern counterpart of the definitive patterns of attitude and conduct from traditional virtue ethics) as being a crucial element in shaping a notion of authenticity that can be directly connected to a liberal endorsement of ‘experiments in living’:

*Brief habits. –* I love brief habits and consider them an inestimable means for getting to know *many* things and states, down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitternesses … I always believe that here is something that will give me lasting satisfaction *–* brief habits, too, have this faith of passion, this faith in eternity … But one day its time is up. (Nietzsche 1974 [1882], pp. 236-237)

The main thing here is to realize that the search for authenticity doesn’t entail settling once and for all behavioral and motivational patterns: variation and self-experimentation become necessary requirements in order to lead an ‘authentic’ life. So the turning point with existentialist authenticity is the focus on commitments, thus acknowledging the projective nature of the self. But if someone always found herself caught up in a process of self-experimentation, it would follow that she can never actually grasp her ‘own’ self, either in the form of some core natural traits, or as an immutable set of beliefs and desires. Even in such extreme cases, the idea of authenticity would still remain a subject of *hope*. But what kind of hope is it? It is the hope that her projective self could finally be made object to a *retrospective* gaze: something like the chemical ‘precipitate’ of numerous variations, trials, and experiments with oneself (Iftode 2015). To put it otherwise, this would imply that looking for authenticity relates not only to permanent traits or to those guiding values, beliefs, and commitments that we would chose to maintain over time, but also to what we chose to return to, after experiencing different things, different perspectives on things and even different mind-sets.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A second key remark derives from Nietzsche’s assessment of ‘brief habits’ as entailing *passion* for the things that you do and the ideas you are now endorsing, even if this passion will prove to be an ephemeral one. This would mean that, at the practical level of decision-making, authenticity entails a combination of passion (strong attraction, positive intense feelings towards an alternative) and critical reflection. Yet, only the future will tell whether this was an expression of my ‘authentic’ self or not. Nevertheless, connecting the notion of ‘brief habits’ to existentialist authenticity allows us to find a balance between what we might call, drawing on Larmore (2010), the two poles of modern authenticity: the pole of *passion* as an expression of ‘naturalness’, and the existentialist pole of *commitment* as a fruit of practical reflection.

I am not denying that both the search for coherence (Pugh *et al.* 2017) and the sharing of values with significant others (Nyholm and O’Neill 2017) are important factors in guiding our choices. Nevertheless, when it comes to the matter of authenticity, I judge this aspiration to heavily rely on present passion and personal commitment for a future, rather than rational coherence or common values.

# Assessing two recent accounts of authenticity in enhancement ethics

At this stage, a brief discussion of Kadlac’s recent proposal (2017) allows us to clarify an important distinction. According to Kadlac, what remains essential for the idea of authenticity is ‘a disdain for phoniness or fakery’. This would entail that the use of enhancement technologies becomes problematic from the point of view of an ethic of authenticity only when it is unacknowledged or hidden from others.

It is true that the notion of an ‘authentic phony’ seems contradictory. But does it seem so because the accurate self-presentation would lie ‘at the heart of authenticity’, or because of the unavoidable *value* connotation we attach to the idea of authenticity, as I argued in a previous section of this paper? If we avoid the exact term ‘authenticity’, we can very well state things such as ‘Lying is in his nature’, ‘Treachery runs in her veins’, or speak about the ‘phony nature’ of an individual. What I wish to argue is that a notion of authenticity understood as veridical self-presentation doesn’t abolish the factical possibility of being a real phony. It is only the positive value connotation we attach to authenticity, thus revealing its social dimension, that makes us feel a contradiction when coining the phrase ‘authentic phony’. Therefore, the problem raised by Kadlac doesn’t seem to highlight the essence of authenticity: it is actually about *honesty*. Honesty is certainly a legitimate moral concern, but not at all identical with the concern for authenticity: at the most, it targets a primary and problematic level of understanding authenticity as sheer sincerity (Williams 2002, pp. 189-191). We should also acknowledge that the value of honesty is not the same thing as the social need for steadiness in the attitude and behavior of individuals, which Williams has emphasized. Honesty is something to be valued in any society, but the basic need is to know what to expect from others. The social dimension of authenticity can be derived from this need: being able to say about a person whom you strongly interact with that she is a person of *this* kind, with these attitudes and beliefs. And by doing this, being able to predict more or less accurately her behavior.

A final brief assessment of Pugh, Maslen and Savulescu’s *diachronic* approach to authenticity (2017) in the context of discussing invasive technologies such as DBS, already in use as experimental treatments, will help me to better clarify the alternative view I am defending here. First, my *retrospective* concept of authenticity seems to be in agreement with their claim to look ‘at the patient’s preferences and values over time’ (Maslen *et al.* 2015, pp. 227-228), while encouraging the patients ‘to reflect on changes to their mood and behavior both when “on” and “off” stimulation, in order to better determine whether the patient embraces them as authentic over time’ (Pugh *et al.* 2017, p. 641). I am somehow less convinced when it comes to the rationalist ‘coherence account of personal autonomy’ (inspired by Laura Waddell Ekstrom) as guiding our view of the ‘true self’ (Pugh *et al.* 2017, pp. 646-648).

It is true that the rational mode of the human mind is usually striving for coherence, and it is also true that intelligible self-change should be grounded on some of the ‘agent’s preexisting values and commitments’ (Pugh *et al.* 2017, p. 646). Also, the opinions of our significant others and the shared values of our in-group play a key role in guiding our choices, as Nyholm and O’Neill (2017) rightly argue. Nevertheless, it is important to clearly state that coherence at a particular moment in time doesn’t entail the persistence throughout one’s existence of any of the values and commitments that the agent is now endorsing, a thing that Pugh *et al.* note only in passing.[[17]](#footnote-17) Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the existentialist view emphasizes the discontinuity with one’s own past rather than the coherence, the moment of rupture, rather than what we chose to maintain over time. And this is a key feature for a notion of ‘experimental’ authenticity.

Therefore, existentialist authenticity makes room for radical changes.[[18]](#footnote-18) And it is precisely the belief that searching for narrative coherence in our existences bears in the end the mark of inauthenticity that makes Sartre insist upon the distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ reflection. He wants to make clear that ‘the decision of pure reflection (…) renounces the attempt at a synthetic unification of the self by the self, which leads necessarily to realizing this unification outside itself and to sacrificing lived consciousness’ (Sartre 1992, pp. 478-479).

However, this is Sartre’s radical outlook on authenticity, entailing a real ‘split’ in the subject. Following my own proposal means we shouldn’t neglect the other demand of authenticity, that of achieving ‘steadiness’. So I accept that we normally search for coherence in our examined lives: nevertheless, there are limit cases when coherence is not what matters most.

# Conclusions

In one important respect, I consider my life being ‘good’ to the extent that it represents both the expression of my *choices* and my *passions*; in other words, as far as I have lived following my own choices and doing the things I am most passionate about. In this paper, I argued for a redesigned view of an ideal that remains central to contemporary Western culture, claiming that the social dimension of authenticity and the experimental one function together, as two demands that are limiting one another and have to be balanced.

On the one hand, to acknowledge the social dimension of authenticity means to accept a framework for rationally limiting the existentialist self-experiments from the perspective of their validation through public debate, in order for the available alternatives to be recognized as valuable and worthy of being followed. At the same time, the need for recognition and public validation – where what matters most is the approval of one’s critical friends – prevents the craving for authenticity to become an endless and confused search for novelty and differentiation from others at any cost.

On the other hand, the task of opening up to various trials, styles of existence and ‘experiments in living’, while holding on to that *retrospective* gaze trying to depict not perfect coherence in our lives and systems of beliefs, but rather that existential truth of returning and repetition (instead of waiting for a secular *metanoia* that would reveal our ownmost possibility and destiny), prevent our identity patterns from becoming merely an expression of social conformism and ‘normalization’.

Nothing forbids us envisaging new possibilities of technologically promoting and enhancing self-experiments in living, ‘technologies of the self’ going well beyond the area of conventional treatment. All of this remains, to be sure, highly speculative. Embracing the scientific progress that can be made in this field doesn’t mean we ignore Foucault’s final warning (1983) about the fact that the line separating techniques of power aiming at ‘biopolitical normalization’ from techniques of the self that promote personal autonomy is always a thin and continuously moving one. But this kind of awareness gives us an important reason to move the enhancement debate further than the well-worn pros and cons reiterated in the ongoing clash between bioconservatives and bioliberals. Ethical considerations have to be contextualized and a verdict should be pronounced only through a careful assessment of all possible uses and abuses of a particular technology.

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1. Such an argument could be advanced as a reason for submitting oneself to SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery), as well as for the use of anti-depressives. Even the highly invasive use of DBS (Deep Brain Stimulation) is regarded by a lot of patients as an enhancement of their ability to live *authentically* (Kraemer 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here I focus on the authenticity of values. I am not denying that we can also regard certain deep biological traits of an individual as being ‘authentic’ traits that will remain unchanged under normal conditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘The inner voice to which we listen, and which tells us what being human is for us, may not whisper of acceptance. Instead, its message might be that we should change, to bring inner and outer into harmony’ (Levy 2011, p. 316). Elliott (1998, p. 182) was already aware of the fact that ‘the very idea of an authentic self is slippery. Can we really say that Prozac has moved a person away from her authentic self, or her true personality, if, like Kramer’s patients, she says she feels like herself only when she is on the drug?’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to the definition advanced by Juth (2011, p. 34): ‘enhancements, i.e. amplifications or extensions, of human capabilities, functions, or forms.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A second reason could be advanced through a pragmatic analysis of the common uses of the word ‘authenticity’, but I will not be doing that here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I borrow the term ‘naturalness’ from Stendhal, who regarded it as the supreme personal value, thus proving himself to be an idiosyncratic follower of Helvétius: a Realist writer endowed with a Romantic sensibility (Larmore 2010, p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Take the case of Rorty’s plea for an “aesthetic life”, accompanied by a radical destruction of any notion of authenticity involving a unified, centered self (Rorty 1991): it seems like a typical case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* script, scene 20 (available from: http://montypython.50webs.com/scripts/Life\_of\_Brian/20.htm). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I think this also gives us the right clue to understand the key notion of ‘practical confidence’, introduced by Williams in his major book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (2006, p. 171) as a way of overcoming the modern tension between the ‘certainty model’ and the ‘decision model’. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. We are speaking about a non-tribal society, or rather a multi-tribal one, at least from the point of view of shared moralities, if we are to follow Haidt (2012) or Greene (2013). As to the issue of variety, Hyun’s broader approach of authentic values (when compared to the usual ‘critical reflection’ approach) highlights in an opportune fashion the need to have access to ‘alternatives’ in any situation engaging embodied values that are regarded as models to be followed and not to be ‘barred from these other options for reasons that are morally illegitimate’ (Hyun 2001, p. 204; see also Bolt 2007, p. 294). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As Levy has convincingly argued, self-discovery and self-creation are merely theoretical opposites, the reality favoring moderate and mixed views on authenticity. We may believe in self-discovery without believing in an essential, immutable self, by just embracing the ancient idea of dispositions and talents that shape up a character. Conversely, the plea for self-creation shouldn’t elude the extreme difficulty of changing ourselves: real, enduring change is a lot harder to obtain than it is usually advertised in folk psychology or self-help manuals (Levy 2011, p. 312; see also Pugh *et al.* 2017, p. 648). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kadlac’s recent account of authenticity also seems to implicitly exclude this unity of the self: ‘it seems that those striving for authenticity should devote some attention to determining how they will be perceived’ (Kadlac 2017, p. 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Heidegger is extremely clear on this point: ‘*authentic* [eigentliches] – that is, something of its own [sich zueigen ist] … As modes of Being, *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* (these expressions have been chosen terminologically in a strict sense) are both grounded in the fact that any Dasein whatsoever is characterized by mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*, literally meaning “what is in each case mine”]’ (2001 [1927], p. 68). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. However, if we take a more pragmatic stance, the individual’s commitment to quit gambling in Sartre’s notorious example (1993 [1943], pp. 32-33), once it is autonomously expressed, may be endorsed and realized in the future by combined appeal to a pharmaceutical enhancer and talk therapy, that is a combination of passive and active means for enhancement (see Focquaert and Schermer 2015; Pugh *et al.* 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I also think that the religious origin of the notion becomes obvious in passages such as this: ‘Resoluteness implies handing oneself down (*über-liefernden*) by anticipation to the “there” of the moment of vision (*das Da des Augenblicks*); and this handing down we call “fate” (*Schicksal*)’ (Heidegger 2001 [1927], p. 438). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘Our real opinion is not one in which we have never wavered, but the one to which we have most regularly returned’, states Diderot, in the *Conversation between d’Alembert and Diderot* (cited by Williams 2002, p. 192). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ‘Although we may come to change many or even all of our values over time...’ (Pugh *et al.* 2017, p. 647). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For the same reason, an existentialist conception of authenticity enables a more positive assessment of radical enhancement technologies than does the ‘dual-basis view of diachronic authenticity’ that Pugh *et al.* are endorsing. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)