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4. Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," 725.
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6. Karen Jaehne, "Double Trouble," *Film Comment* 24 (1988): 22.
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8. Beard and Handling, "The Interview," 188.
9. William Beard, *The Artist as Monster: The Cinema of David Cronenberg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 271.
10. Xavier Mendik, "Logic, Creativity and (Critical) Misinterpretations: An Interview with David Cronenberg," in *The Modern Fantastic: The Films of David Cronenberg*, ed. Michael Grant (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Paperbacks, 2000), 168–86; Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 178.
11. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1989).
12. Chris Rodley, ed., *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (Toronto: Knopf, 1992), 72.
13. Beard, *The Artist as Monster*, 74.
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15. J. G. Ballard, interview, *Crash* (Criterion Collection, 1996), laserdisk.
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Self-Creation, Identity, and Authenticity

A Study of *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*

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David Cronenberg's early work in science fiction and horror may seem to bear only a faint similarity to *A History of Violence* (2005) and *Eastern Promises* (2007). These later films broaden Cronenberg's repertoire into the genres of action and gangster movies. However, there are important thematic continuities between these films and his earlier films. Cronenberg's work continuously explores questions about the nature of the self and the relation of the self to the human body: *Shivers* (1975), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1981), *Videodrome* (1983), and *The Fly* (1986) all raise challenging philosophical questions about personal identity. It is helpful to distinguish two main groups of problems that are usually classified as philosophical questions of personal identity: *metaphysical* problems of personal identity, and *practical* problems of personal identity. The metaphysical problems of personal identity are a main point of concern in Cronenberg's earlier work in horror and science fiction. By directly addressing the practical problems of personal identity, *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises* expand the range of philosophical reflections on the self that are explored in Cronenberg's films.

Metaphysical Problems

The central metaphysical problems of personal identity are concerned with determining both the criteria for being a person and the criteria for persons to persist over time. The genre of science fiction is an excellent medium for exploring these metaphysical puzzles. In *The Fly*, Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum) is an ordinary scientist who is conducting research on teleportation. Brundle uses himself as a guinea pig to test whether his transporter pods can successfully transport a human. When he steps into the transporter

pod he does not realize that a fly is in the pod with him. Their bodies are disintegrated, and Brundle appears to emerge from another pod. However, the post-transportation Brundle soon learns that the pretransportation Brundle and the fly have been genetically fused. The hybrid body sheds its human appearance and eventually transforms into a human-size fly. Since the hybrid creature that results from the transportation process is not human, the philosophical question is: Did Seth survive the transportation process? Suppose that two people step into a transporter pod and the transportation process fused them into one living creature that appeared to be a normal human being. Would the resulting person be strictly identical with either of the original persons whose bodies were fused? In addition to stories involving the fusion of persons, or the fusion of insects and persons, there are science fiction cases involving the *fission* of persons. Suppose that Seth steps in one transporter pod, the original body is destroyed, and two people are created by the process. Would the pretransportation Seth survive the process? The resulting persons would think that they were Seth, and they would have all of Seth's memories and dispositions. Would they be duplicates of Seth, or would Seth now have two bodies? These philosophical questions that emerge from cases involving the fission and fusion of persons are some of the central metaphysical problems of personal identity.

Practical Problems

Practical problems of personal identity, in contrast with the metaphysical problems, are not primarily concerned with *what* it is to be a person. The practical problems of personal identity focus on the question of *who* a person is. They often emerge from the first-person perspective and commonly arise when one seriously asks, "Who am I? Am I really who I think I am?" Seriously reflecting on these questions is often not an exercise in philosophy, and this kind of reflection may also serve as an ordinary attempt to understand one's own character and commitments. The results of this kind of reflection are often central decisions and choices that are involved in the processes of *self-discovery* and *self-creation*.

The form of self-discovery involved in having a practical identity is a matter of discovering, from the first-person perspective, who one really is. This form of self-discovery neither requires one to formulate a comprehensive metaphysical theory about personhood and persistence nor requires one to discover the best causal/scientific explanation of one's behavior. Metaphysical theorizing and scientific explanations of the world are concerned with providing an accurate representation of the world from a third-person

perspective (from the point of view that an all-knowing being would have on the world).¹ This form of self-discovery is also a form of self-creation. It is a creative process that is an endless task of experimenting with various projects, roles, and relationships.² The concept of self-creation may seem paradoxical or incoherent if it is understood as a metaphysical description of one's relation to oneself. How could a person create (or author or constitute) oneself unless there is already a self there to do the creating?³ However, if we understand the "self" in these concepts to refer to one's *practical identity*, the air of paradox is dispelled. The concept of the self (practical identity) and the concept of personhood are not identical. A practical identity could be the result of the free choices of an immaterial soul, or it could result from the completely determined activity of the human brain. Practical identities are *created* and *discovered* by individuals. The apparently paradoxical concepts of *self-authorship*, *self-articulation*, and *self-creation* are neither genuinely paradoxical nor metaphysically problematic.

Authentic and Inauthentic Persons

The practical problems of personal identity often occur in contexts in which one is unclear about one's most fundamental desires, projects, commitments, and responsibilities. They usually occur when one does not have a clear understanding of who one really is. For instance, Cronenberg reports that when he was directing his first feature-length film, *Shivers*, he had no idea what he was doing and he was trying not to convey this to his cast. He was acting as director of the film, but he found himself asking, "Am I really a director?"⁴ Cronenberg certainly knew that he was the director of the film, and he knew that he wanted to be a director. His question can plausibly be understood to reveal that he had some uncertainty about who he really was at the time: it raises doubts about his practical identity and his authenticity.

A person's practical identity is a salient aspect of his or her self-conception: a person's practical identity is a conception, from the first-person perspective, of the nature and value of one's own life and actions.⁵ Authenticity is intuitively understood to be a matter of being true to oneself. What is the nature of the *self* that authentic people are true toward? What is involved in being *true* to it? Arguably, authentic people are true toward their *practical identities*: questions about authenticity are practical problems of personal identity. So, in what sense are authentic individuals true to their practical identities? To address this question, it is helpful to consider people who are *inauthentic*: such persons are often guilty of a form of betrayal—they betray themselves in an important sense. Inauthentic persons are normally

characterized by unreflective role-playing in society, having an unreflective obsession with fitting in, and failing to deliberate about their commitments or becoming inundated with pointless or trivial commitments.⁶ Authentic persons tend to avoid these traits because they remain true to themselves by examining themselves. Authentic persons reflect upon their practical identities and their relations to others and to the world that they inhabit.

Cavell on Movie Stardom

Just as science fiction is an excellent genre for exploring metaphysical problems about personal identity, gangster films, or films that examine the psychology and culture of gangsters, are excellent venues for exploring practical problems of personal identity. The main, or most interesting, characters in these films usually struggle with conflicting loyalties and commitments.⁷ The ethical conflicts that these characters face often lead them to a deeper understanding of themselves and provide them with an opportunity to live more authentically. *A History of Violence* examines a family man (Viggo Mortensen) in a small town who is terrorized by a group of gangsters who believe that he is a former gang member against whom they have a vendetta. *Eastern Promises* shows how the life of a midwife (Naomi Watts) in London is transformed when her search for the family of an orphaned baby creates ties with a group of dangerous Russian mobsters. Both of these films provide genuine insights into what it is to live authentically.

It is striking that in each of these films, Viggo Mortensen stars as a character who is involved with an organized crime family. To identify what is striking about Mortensen starring in these specific roles, it is helpful to consider some of Stanley Cavell's thoughts about movie stardom.⁸ Cavell maintains that movie stars are human subjects that fulfill the film medium's need for *individualities*. According to Cavell, individualities are individuals who have become *film types*. Just as there are genres of film (prison films, Civil War movies, science fiction, etc.), within these genres there are certain recurring types of figures, which Cavell describes as film types: for example, the Villain, the Family Man, and the Dandy. Cavell contends that one important feature of films is their capacity to create individualities—individual people who achieve the status of a film type: for example, Buster Keaton, Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, Sigourney Weaver, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Movie stars achieve the status of being individualities: their recurrence in Hollywood films has resulted in their becoming film types that are on a par with traditional film types such as the Sheriff, the Priest, the Reporter, and the Other Woman. Individualities can inhabit

various social roles, but they do so in a unique way. Cavell contends that the individualities captured on film have priority over the social roles that they also inhabit. Movie stars, the individualities who usually capture our full attention in films that feature them, are figures whom we have met in previous circumstances and will meet again.

With these Cavellian thoughts in mind, it is striking that David Cronenberg selected Viggo Mortensen to play the central character in both *A History of Violence* and *Eastern Promises*. These films appeared a short time after Mortensen achieved stardom with his performance as Aragorn in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003). Mortensen's stardom brings a certain philosophical depth to the specific characters that he plays in his films with Cronenberg.

Authenticity in *A History of Violence*

In the role of Aragorn, Mortensen plays a man who is a Warrior at the beginning of the story and becomes a King at the end of the tale. Aragorn is the son of a former king, and his destiny is to restore nobility and honor to his royal bloodline. Mortensen's role in *A History of Violence* breaks away from the unambiguous Hero that we remember from *Lord of the Rings*. Tom Stall is a small-town family man who becomes a local hero by killing two men who attempt to murder him and the patrons of his diner. Tom's heroic deeds spark national attention, and soon he is visited by gangsters from Philadelphia who believe that Tom is really a mobster named Joey Cusack. This is not a case of mistaken identity. Tom/Joey must resort to extreme acts of violence when he faces his old enemies Carl Fogarty (Ed Harris) and his brother Richie Cusack (William Hurt) in order to protect himself and his family from the vendettas that these men have against him. Tom must also break away from his past as Joey in order to resume and maintain his role as a Family Man. Tom's history as Joey also raises questions about whether the violent response to the men who attempted to rob his business was genuinely heroic or merely the instinctive reaction of a violent man. A warrior who returns home after war may no longer be fit to live as a husband: the desirable qualities of a man of war may be antithetical to the qualities of a nurturing parent and husband.⁹

In the final scene of the film, Mortensen's character returns to his rural family home. He has killed all his enemies and enters the kitchen while his family is eating dinner. They are angry at him. They feel betrayed by the fact that he never told them about his identity as Joey Cusack. They are also frightened of him because they witnessed him kill two of Fogarty's thugs

and since they are now aware of his violent history as a mobster. When he enters the kitchen, they shun him initially, not speaking to him or looking at him, but eventually his children serve him food and his wife looks at him, in tears, with an expression of acceptance. The scene fades to black. The film leaves it an open question whether the man who enters the kitchen in the final scene is really Tom Stall, Joey Cusack, or someone else entirely. That question is also one in need of clarification. Not only are the audience and the family onscreen wondering, "Who is this man?" but Tom/Joey is also in the process of exploring that question.

One can view *A History of Violence* as raising metaphysical questions about personal identity. Someone might reasonably wonder whether Tom Stall and Joey Cusack are distinct persons sharing a single body. The scenes I will describe explicitly raise those questions. However, there is much to be gained by viewing the film as primarily exploring practical questions about personal identity. The question of whether Mortensen's character is *really* Tom or Joey can be understood as an ethical question about which practical identity he ought to adopt: the commitments and values of a family man or those of a gangster. It is a question of who he really is and which practical identity is more authentic. The man who enters the kitchen in the final scene is Viggo Mortensen, and we know that he has been a hero in previous roles. However, we might also remember some of his darker roles (e.g., the cannibal Tex in *Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* [1990]) and the potential his character has for villainy. The character's practical identity as Tom involves a range of values and commitments that reinforce his role as a Family Man. His practical identity as Joey involves a range of family commitments and past transactions that wed his life to organized crime. There are three scenes from the film that vividly describe the nature and depth of these conflicts. I will call these scenes "Standoff," "The Truth," and "Questions and Answers."

"STANDOFF"

There is a scene in the front yard of the Stall residence where Tom has his last encounter with Fogarty and Fogarty's thugs. After Tom kills Fogarty's goons, Fogarty shoots Tom in the shoulder. Tom hits the ground and drops his pistol. Fogarty kicks the gun away and asks him if he has any last words. Tom replies, "I should have killed you back in Philly." Fogarty responds, "Yeah, Joey. You should have." Fogarty's chest then explodes as Tom's son, Jack (Ashton Holmes), shoots him from behind with a shotgun. (There is an interesting parallel between Jack's growing disposition to violent solutions to problems and his growing knowledge of his father's past. Jack changes from

being mild mannered to having the will to savagely beat up a school bully and then becoming willing to shoot people who are a threat to his family.) Mortensen's character rises, and with Fogarty's blood splashed all over his face and upper body, he snatches the gun away from Jack and they look at each other in a new way. Jack did not know anything about his father's history with Fogarty or his life in Philly. He looks afraid of his father, and his father seems wild from the violent frenzy, and slightly proud of his son. Joey then embraces his son, as the knowledge sets in that Jack heard the confession to Fogarty.

"THE TRUTH"

In the next scene, Mortensen's character is in the hospital recovering from his gunshot wound, and his wife, Edie (Maria Bello), enters the room. Edie has been in the dark about her husband's past as Joey Cusack. They are alone in the room, and she asks him to tell her the truth. Edie tells him: "I saw Joey. I saw you turn into Joey right before my eyes." She continues, "I saw a killer—the one Fogarty warned me about. You did kill men back in Philly, didn't you? Did you do it for money, or did you do it because you enjoyed it?" He replies, "Joey did, both. I didn't. Tom Stall didn't." Edie physically responds by running into the bathroom to vomit. When she returns she asks, "What are you, like some multiple personality schizoid? It's like flipping a switch back and forth for you?" He replies, "I never expected to see Joey again." She asks, "What, was he in hiding? Was he dead?" As he responds, his Philadelphia accent gets much thicker: "I thought he was. I thought I killed Joey Cusack. I went out to the desert and I killed him. I spent three years becoming Tom Stall. Edie, you have to know this. I wasn't really born again until I met you. I was nothing." She replies, "I don't believe you. I can't believe this is happening." She points out that he lied about having adopted parents, growing up in Portland. She also says, "And our name . . . Jesus Christ, my name . . . Jack's name . . . Sarah's name . . . Stall? Tom Stall? Did you just make that up? Where did that name come from?" He replies, "I mean, it was available." She says, "Yeah. I guess I was available too." Edie leaves the room, crying.

The medical setting in this scene and the fact that Mortensen's character is wearing a hospital gown make it natural to think that he has a psychological condition that is some form of medically treatable pathology: multiple personality syndrome or some form of schizophrenia.¹⁰ Edie initially worries that he suffers from some type of psychopathology. Is he delusional? Does he have distinct centers of consciousness that inhabit a single body? However, she quickly forms the opinion that he has just been lying to everyone

about his past. Lying is more blameworthy than being mentally ill. The fact that he describes the process of becoming Tom Stall as being “born again” suggests that the adoption of his identity was a deliberate choice. If he is a former criminal who made a rational decision to break away from his life of crime, then he seems more like a double agent than a psychiatric patient. His circumstances suggest that his life was in danger and he no longer enjoyed being part of an organized crime syndicate. So, he changed his name and took steps to make a new life for himself as a family man in the Midwest. Joey Cusack saw another possible future for himself and decided to adopt another practical identity and discard his old one. It is plausible that the roles of Tom and Joey involve different orientations to the world and different patterns of response to it, but these roles are just different aspects of this character’s practical identity. He has compartmentalized himself into these two different orientations to the world. Interpreting this compartmentalization with psychiatric categories alienates this person from his choices and character.¹¹ Mortensen’s individuality also inhabits these roles with a passionate demeanor, which suggests that his authentic character is more robust than the identities of Tom the Family Man and Crazy Joey. This character’s practical identity as Joey is constricting because he has a strong desire for wholesome goodness that the life of Joey cannot provide him. His practical identity as Tom is suffocating because of his strong desire for a life of action. This is not only a problem for Tom, but it is a general form of conflict that is often experienced by individuals who take up family life.

“QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS”

In the next scene, Mortensen’s character arrives home from the hospital and sees his son. He says, “Hey, Jack.” His son responds by asking an important question, “What am I supposed to call you now?” His father replies, “You’re supposed to call me dad. That’s what I am, your dad.” Jack responds, “Are you really? So, you’re some kind of closet mobster dad?” Jack then turns and rushes away. Jack’s questions reveal that he doubts his father is really Tom Stall. Jack now sees that his father’s life as Tom Stall is inauthentic, that his father is betraying himself by living as a mild-mannered family man in the American Midwest. Later in the film, Richie Cusack also accuses his brother of living an inauthentic existence. Richie regards his brother’s life as Tom Stall as a joke. Richie asks him, “When you dream, are you still Joey?” Mortensen’s character replies, “Joey’s been dead a long time.” Richie responds, “But here you sit, big as life.” Richie and Fogarty refuse to acknowledge that Mortensen’s character is really Tom Stall. When Jack discovers his father’s history, he does not know what to call him. Richie, Fogarty, and Jack know

that the man named Tom Stall is numerically identical with the man named Joey Cusack. Their denial that Joey Cusack is *really* Tom Stall is a rejection of Mortensen’s practical identity as Tom Stall. They think his practical identity as Tom Stall is inauthentic and that his true identity, or his authentic practical identity, is that of Joey Cusack. When Mortensen’s character denies that he is Joey Cusack, he is not merely trying to maintain his cover as Tom Stall. He is also reaffirming his practical identity as Tom Stall and rejecting his practical identity as Joey Cusack. His struggle with Fogarty and Richie is not only over his bodily survival but also over his practical identity and over his authenticity as Tom Stall. Although Mortensen’s character physically survives the battles with Fogarty and Richie, it is unclear whether the practical identity of Tom Stall survives. We do not know whether the man who returns home in the final scene of the film is Tom Stall, Joey Cusack, or some new character. He may be in the process of rejecting his identities as Tom and Joey, and embarking on the project of forging a new practical identity.

In the DVD special feature “Acts of Violence,” a documentary on the making of *A History of Violence*, Cronenberg says that the whole movie is about the question of identity that is raised by the final scene.¹² One important conclusion that is suggested by the ending of the film is that practical identities are usually not fixed, determined, or complete: we are often groping around in this world trying out different practical identities that work for us with varying degrees of success. Practical identities may be discarded or updated to accommodate shifting social worlds. This process of self-creation and self-discovery rarely, if ever, achieves an ending point other than our death.

Authenticity in *Eastern Promises*

While Mortensen’s character in *A History of Violence* is trying to exit his relationship with a crime family, his character in *Eastern Promises* is trying to forge a stronger association with the Russian crime family that employs him. The various types of family bonds that exist in both of these films raise important questions about the nature of one’s commitments and whether one’s family relationships usually undermine or support one’s authenticity. In *A History of Violence*, Joey and Richie are brothers, and their sibling rivalry is one of the main sources of tension between them. Shortly before Richie attempts to kill Joey, Richie says, “You always were a problem for me, Joey. When Mom brought you home from the hospital, I tried to strangle you in your crib. I guess all kids try to do that. She caught me and whacked

the daylights out of me." The parallels with the story of Cain and Abel are clear.¹³ Richie does not succeed in playing the role of Cain, but he does try.

The family relations of the various characters in *Eastern Promises* are important to the film's plot. Anna (Naomi Watts) is a midwife who begins to care for an orphaned baby whose mother, Tatiana (Sarah-Jeanne Labrosse), died in childbirth. Tatiana leaves behind a diary written in Russian, and it contains a card for the Trans-Siberian Restaurant. Anna visits the restaurant, on Christmas Day, with the aim of finding contact information for the baby's family. During her first visit to the Trans-Siberian, she meets the proprietor, Semyon (Armin Mueller-Stahl), his dangerous-looking son Kirill (Vincent Cassel), and his son's even more dangerous-looking associate Nikolai (Mortensen). Anna soon learns that Tatiana was kidnapped by an organization of Russian mobsters called the *Vory v Zakone* ("Thieves in Law," Russian mobsters) and was forced into slavery in a brothel in London. It also turns out that the Trans-Siberian Restaurant is a front for London's branch of the *Vory*. Semyon is the top boss of this crime syndicate, the King of this realm of Russian mob culture. He is also the main patriarch of the film: his subordinates in the *Vory* call him "Papa," he is Kirill's father, and he is the father of Tatiana's orphaned daughter.

Nikolai, Mortensen's character, is attempting to unseat Semyon from his throne. Nikolai occupies many roles in the film. Throughout the film he says, "I'm just a driver." During a scene in which he is removing all the identifying features of the corpse of an assassinated gangster, he is described as an undertaker. Later in the film, he is initiated as a full-fledged member of the *Vory v Zakone* and has their symbolic stars tattooed on his knees and above his heart. However, Mortensen's character does not authentically inhabit any of those roles, because he is really a Russian secret service agent who is working undercover with Scotland Yard to break apart Semyon's crime ring. Eventually, Scotland Yard confirms that Semyon is the father of Tatiana's daughter, and he is arrested for raping Tatiana (and possibly charged for her kidnapping and murder). Nikolai never blows his cover, and at the end of the film, he and Kirill are the new Kings.

Kirill may be the least authentic of the main characters in *Eastern Promises*. I do not intend to suggest that Vincent Cassel's performance is not authentic; I mean that Kirill, the character, is the least authentic of the main characters in the film. The criminal world of the *Vory v Zakone* has its own structure, codes, and conventions. The world of the *Vory v Zakone* is ordinary for Kirill: he grew up in it. He claims that the stars are a birthmark for him. Kirill's own life is overly conventional: it is governed by the strict rules of the *Vory*, and he does not seem to reflectively endorse the code and

way of life. Kirill seems to simply assume that his life is the life of a *Vor* and there is nothing else to be said. Kirill is not a completely inauthentic person, because he betrays his father, who is also his senior in the *Vory v Zakone*, when he is convinced by Nikolai that his father's order to kill his baby half sister is illegitimate. As Kirill is about to throw the baby into the river, Nikolai arrives and says, "We do not kill babies. This would be bad for us. Your papa has gone too far. You're either with him or with me." He tells Kirill that his father is going away and the business is now going to be in Kirill's hands. Nikolai takes the baby and gives her to Anna. (By becoming a new mob boss and passing the baby to Anna, Nikolai symbolically takes up the new role of papa.) Anna asks Nikolai why he helped her and baby Christine. Nikolai replies, "How can you be king if the king is still in place?" Kirill's decision to give the baby over to Nikolai and Anna may be a result of some moral misgivings, but it is also clearly motivated by his intense attraction to Nikolai. Even in Kirill's best moments he appears to be primarily motivated by a desire to be accepted by others, which is an indication of his inauthenticity.

Semyon probably exemplifies more authenticity than any other character in *Eastern Promises*. To back up this claim, it is helpful to consider some general characteristics of authenticity. Authentic persons are true to themselves: their projects are truly their *own* and not the products of blind allegiance to social conventions. Authentic persons are not alienated from their own projects. Anna's first impression of Semyon is that he loves good food and music, and he takes pride in his Russian heritage, cuisine, and culture. This impression is correct: it seems that he would be a successful restaurant owner even if he were not involved with the Russian Mafia. Moreover, he is a prominent member of the *Vory v Zakone* who reflectively deals with problems facing his organization and his family. He abides by the code of the *Vory*, and he adheres to it with a seriousness that reveals a reflective affirmation of his practical identity. Semyon is also loyal to his son and deploys a great deal of cunning to protect Kirill from Chechen assassins who are trying to kill him. He may have the vices of being a morally wicked person and being involved in a vast amount of violent crime, but he seems to be true to himself and true to his convictions.

Individualist Authenticity

Authenticity is commonly considered to be an aesthetic ideal that sharply contrasts with the moral ideal of sincerity.¹⁴ (Philosophers commonly distinguish *moral* evaluation, which is concerned with judging the moral permissibility of actions, from *aesthetic* evaluation, which is focused on the

judgment of whether something is beautiful.) Since a morally wicked person such as Semyon can be authentic, there is reason to believe that authenticity is not a moral virtue or ideal. Before examining the issue of whether Semyon really does exemplify authenticity, I will consider some of the philosophical debates surrounding the topic of authenticity.

The ideal of authenticity is closely related to the contemporary aesthetic ideals of originality, creativity, and distinctiveness: authentic persons are original, creative, and distinctive in the way that they exemplify their processes of self-discovery and self-articulation. Various existentialist philosophers condemn the *inauthenticity* that they perceive in conventional role-playing by persons such as waiters who take their jobs too seriously, and they denounce those types of inauthentic performances of one's social roles as symptomatic of "bad faith." The classic discussion of bad faith is found in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.¹⁵ This conception of authenticity is strongly *individualist*. Individualist conceptions of authenticity stress the importance of individuals' being true to themselves, and this form of self-understanding is often contrasted with conformity to the demands of society.

Individualist conceptions of authenticity are often criticized on the grounds that they promote self-indulgence and a "culture of narcissism." One salient example of this line of criticism is presented by Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity*.¹⁶ Taylor contends that individualist conceptions of authenticity may involve an overly obsessive concern with the self that leads one to shut out or ignore issues that are greater than or transcend the self: issues about religion, politics, or human history.¹⁷ Although Taylor is ultimately critical of strongly individualist conceptions of authenticity, he maintains that many critics of these conceptions fail to acknowledge the genuine value of self-discovery and self-articulation. He also argues that any plausible theory of authenticity must describe its importance to the individuals that possess it, but one must also recognize that there are moral constraints on the *content* of the projects that can be pursued by authentic persons. Taylor claims that individualist conceptions of authenticity fail to distinguish the *manner* of being authentic (i.e., the manner of pursuing one's ends or projects) from the *matter* (i.e., content) of the ends of authentic persons.¹⁸ Thus, Taylor contends, the emphasis that individualist conceptions of authenticity place on authentic persons' pursuing ends that are their *own*, as opposed to the ends of society or another person, fails to recognize that the projects of many authentic persons connect their practical identities to a social order. In sum, Taylor argues that authentic persons must be reasonable, and being reasonable requires that one respond to moral demands that fall outside the gamut of mere economic (instrumental) rationality. So,

Taylor's theory of authenticity goes against the commonly held view that authenticity is an aesthetic ideal and not a moral ideal.

One serious problem facing Taylor's conception of authenticity is that morally wicked persons like Semyon can exemplify a great deal of authenticity. Taylor maintains that there are moral constraints placed on the content of the projects of authentic persons, because authentic persons may deeply identify with projects or ends that transcend the self. However, Semyon reasonably identifies with his commitment to the *Vory v Zakone*: this is a commitment to a social order that is greater than him. He is committed to the "moral code" of the *Vory*, but their social conventions are morally illegitimate. The moral code of the *Vory* requires a subordinate member to obey a superior's command to kill an innocent person or to rape a woman. However, the boss of a criminal organization does not have the genuine moral authority to make it morally legitimate for a thug to either kill an innocent person or to rape someone. So, Taylor's theory of authenticity does not make a strong case for the view that authentic persons cannot be morally wicked. Perhaps there are strong reasons for believing that authentic persons cannot be morally wicked, but Taylor's argument does not provide them. Considerations of a person's authenticity do raise important questions about a person's practical identity, but those questions do not straightforwardly settle the issue of which practical identities or commitments it is morally legitimate for a person to identify with or adopt. Nikolai's double life as a mobster and as a government agent may diminish his authenticity, but the moral value and decency of his attempt to end the criminal activity of the *Vory v Zakone* provide him with strong reasons to live a less-than-fully-authentic life.

A History of Violence and *Eastern Promises* together provide a compelling and important meditation on the topics of practical identity and authenticity. Although Cronenberg does not provide any decisive resolutions to the puzzles and problems surrounding these topics, these films move us toward a deeper understanding of them.

Notes

I thank C. D. C. Reeve, Simon Riches, and Benjamin Bagley for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. For more on the distinction between the first-person and third-person perspectives, see Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2. Iris Murdoch describes the “endless task” of shaping one’s moral vision in the chapter “The Idea of Perfection” in *Existentialists and Mystics*, ed. Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1998), 317–18. I understand the task of shaping one’s moral vision to be a central element of the process of self-creation. C. D. C. Reeve’s chapter “Seeing, Improvising and Self-Love” in *Love’s Confusions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 15–35, is rich with insights into the nature of this process of self-creation.

3. The apparent paradox that emerges from the concept of self-constitution is carefully discussed by Christine Korsgaard in *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41–44.

4. Cronenberg expresses these self-doubts in an interview that is available on the 1998 DVD release of the director’s cut of *Shivers* (Image Entertainment).

5. I use the term “practical identity” in roughly the same way it is used in Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Korsgaard formulates her conception of practical identities in the following passage: “The conception of one’s identity in question here is . . . understood as a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking. So I will call this a conception of your practical identity” (101).

6. C. D. C. Reeve’s reflections on the relation of sentimentality to inauthenticity in the chapter “Sentimentality and the Gift of the Self” in *Love’s Confusions* (92–104) helpfully illustrate how a society’s fantasies can foster inauthenticity.

7. For a philosophically sophisticated discussion of the types of conflicting obligations that a mafioso might experience, see Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 254–58.

8. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (New York: Viking, 1971), 33–35.

9. Reeve’s *Love’s Confusions* contains enlightening reflections on this issue.

10. Cronenberg’s latest film, *A Dangerous Method* (2011), is about the relationship between Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Viggo Mortensen is cast as Sigmund Freud!

11. One of the central topics in the philosophy of psychiatry is whether individuals who are categorized with mental disorders are mad or bad. For a discussion of this issue, see Mike W. Martin, *From Morality to Mental Health: Virtue and Vice in a Therapeutic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

12. “Acts of Violence,” *A History of Violence* (New Line, 2006), DVD.

13. The documentary “Acts of Violence” reports that in the original screenplay, Joey and Richie were old friends. Cronenberg changed the script to make them brothers. This change was intended to intensify the dramatic tension between them.

14. For the classic discussion of the relation of authenticity and sincerity, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971). For another outstanding, and more recent, discussion of philosophical perspectives on authenticity, see Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London: Routledge, 2006).

15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956),

and Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), argue that authentic persons are not guided by the conventional norms of “the they.” Heidegger’s perspective on the topic had an enormous influence on the version of existentialism formulated by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*.

16. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

17. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 14.

18. Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 82.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF DAVID CRONENBERG

Edited by Simon Riches



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