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Trauma, Disociación y Autenticidad Relacional

Trauma, Dissociation, and Relational Authenticity

Michelle Maiese

Emmanuel College, United States
maiesemi@emmanuel.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4039-4561

Resumen

El trauma relacional puede entenderse como una lesión psicológica que ocurre en el contexto de relaciones interpersonales abusivas y parece estar relacionado con una amplia gama de enfermedades mentales. Sin embargo, un daño potencial del trauma que no ha recibido mucha atención por parte de los filósofos es la amenaza que representa para la autenticidad. Para comprender por qué el trauma relacional crea potencialmente impedimentos para la agencia auténtica, debemos considerar otros dos fenómenos que comúnmente se asocian con él: (i) disociación y (ii) disminución de la confianza habitual. Mientras que la disociación relacionada con el trauma suele implicar la alienación corporal y el desapego de uno mismo, la disminución de la confianza habitual a menudo conduce a la alienación de los demás. Sostengo que el desapego disociativo y la confianza habitual disminuida a menudo se refuerzan mutuamente y que, juntos, pueden hacer que los agentes se desconecten de sí mismos, de los demás y de la realidad de lo que les ha sucedido. ¿Qué implicaciones tiene esto para la agencia auténtica entre los individuos traumatizados? Después de esbozar las concepciones existentes, enfatizo el importante sentido en el que la autenticidad es relacional y está respaldada por conexiones sociales. También analizo varias competencias que sustentan la autenticidad y sostengo que la interacción entre el desapego disociativo y la confianza habitual atenuada puede dificultar que las personas traumatizadas desarrollen y mantengan estas competencias. Por lo tanto, el trauma que han experimentado les impide conducir sus vidas de acuerdo con sus preocupaciones y deseos genuinos.

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Palabras clave: alienación corporal, autoconocimiento existencial, autofragmentación, desapego emocional, confianza habitual.

Abstract

Relational trauma can be understood as a psychological injury that occurs in the context of abusive interpersonal relationships and appears to be correlated with a wide array of mental illnesses. However, one potential harm of trauma that has not received much attention from philosophers is the threat it poses to authenticity. To understand why relational trauma potentially creates impediments to authentic agency, we need to consider two other phenomena that are commonly associated with it: (i) dissociation, and (ii) diminished habitual trust. Whereas trauma-related dissociation commonly involves bodily alienation and detachment from the self, diminished habitual trust often leads to alienation from others. I maintain that dissociative detachment and diminished habitual trust often are mutually reinforcing and that, together, they can cause agents to become disconnected from themselves, others, and the reality of what has happened to them. What implications does this have for authentic agency among traumatized individuals? After outlining existing conceptions, I emphasize the important sense in which authenticity is relational and scaffolded by social connections. I also discuss several competencies that undergird authenticity and argue that the interplay between dissociative detachment and attenuated habitual trust can make it difficult for traumatized individuals to develop and sustain these competencies. Thus, the trauma they have experienced impedes their ability to conduct their lives in accordance with their genuine cares and desires.

Keywords: bodily alienation, emotional detachment, existential self-knowledge, habitual trust, splitting; wholeheartedness.

1. Introduction

Trauma can be understood as a psychological injury incurred through terrifying or otherwise overwhelming experiences (Martin et al., 2022, p. 2). The nature of this injury may differ depending on the nature of the associated experience and whether it involves witnessing violent events, navigating natural disasters, or being subjected to some sort of abuse. Here, I wish to focus on *relational trauma*, i.e., trauma that occurs in the context of abusive interpersonal relationships and appears to be correlated with a wide array of mental illnesses, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Lindert et al., 2014). The nature and extent of its psychological impact appears to vary depending on various factors, including the subject's age, duration of trauma, and whether the subject has other trusted social connections (Martin et al., 2022; Ogawa et al., 1997). One potential

harm of trauma that has not received much attention from philosophers is the threat it poses to authenticity. Whereas philosophical discussions of authenticity often focus on agents who have full control of their lives, an investigation of trauma reveals that agents in the real world often lack this degree of control. The account presented here acknowledges that we are vulnerable beings who depend on others, and whose practical agency can be undermined by abusive interpersonal relationships.

To understand why relational trauma potentially creates impediments to authentic agency, we need to consider two other phenomena that are commonly associated with it: (i) dissociation, and (ii) diminished habitual trust. In the next section, I discuss these two phenomena and examine how trauma-related dissociation commonly involves bodily alienation and emotional detachment from the self, whereas diminished habitual trust often leads to alienation from others. I maintain that dissociative detachment and diminished habitual trust often are mutually reinforcing and that, together, they can cause agents to become disconnected from themselves, others, and the reality of what has happened to them. What implications does this have for authentic agency among traumatized individuals? In section 3, I set the stage for this discussion by outlining existing conceptions of authenticity: (a) avoiding pretense, (b) wholeheartedness, (c) existential self-knowledge, and (d) spontaneity. Rather than defending any specific account over others, I emphasize the important sense in which authenticity is relational and scaffolded by social connections. I also discuss several competencies that undergird authenticity and enable agents to gain a sense of what they care about and value. Then, in section 4, I argue that the interplay between dissociative detachment and attenuated habitual trust can make it difficult for traumatized individuals to develop and sustain these competencies. Thus, the trauma they have experienced impedes their ability to conduct their lives in accordance with their genuine cares and desires.

2. Dissociative Detachment and Attenuated Habitual Trust

The World Health Organization has defined dissociation as "a partial or complete loss of the normal integration between memories of the past, awareness of identity and immediate sensations, and control of bodily movements" (1992, p. 151). Dissociative phenomena include compartmentalization, derealization, emotional detachment, numbing, selective amnesia, and out of body experience. Whereas some forms of dissociation are common during childhood, when many subjects have imaginary companions or sleepwalk, pathological dissociation involves experiences that rarely are experienced by ordinary people. What makes some dissociation "pathological" is that it involves disturbances in memory, disruptions to a subject's sense of self, and fragmentation of conscious experience (Martin et al., 2022, p. 2); often it becomes difficult for subjects to form a well-integrated self-identity.

Both discrete traumatic events (e.g., witnessing a violent crime) and continuous relational trauma (e.g., ongoing abuse) can precipitate dissociation. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all traumatized individuals develop dissociative symptoms, and not everyone who dissociates has experienced discrete episodes of trauma (Martin et al., 2022, p. 2). Some individuals are more prone to dissociation and there are many different factors (such as family of origin, birth order, genetics, and intelligence) (Cohen, 2004, p. 225) that impact the extent to which someone dissociates. What is more, dissociative experience during trauma can be more or less severe and is not a yes/no mechanism (Ataria, 2015). The extent to which a subject dissociates can vary from day to day or hour to hour, and this dissociation can manifest in several different ways.

Prolonged relational trauma, particularly that which occurs during childhood, has been found to be correlated with both negative dissociative symptoms (which involve a loss of memory and awareness) and positive dissociative symptoms (which include intrusive thoughts or memories) (Van der Hart et al., 2004). Especially in cases where fighting, escape, or other forms of resistance are impossible, traumatized individuals may experience a shift in consciousness. Their perceptions may become distorted, events may seem unusual or unreal (derealization), and they may experience emotional numbing or detachment (Ataria, 2015, p. 200). These sorts of dissociation commonly contribute to alterations of consciousness that disrupt their sense of self and self-continuity (Martin et al., 2022, p. 2). Particularly relevant for my discussion of authentic agency are the negative dissociative symptoms that involve defensively detaching from one's surroundings; this encompasses both bodily alienation and emotional detachment (i.e., detachment from one's body and distressing affective states), and also social alienation (i.e., detachment from other people).

In cases where dissociation operates as a mode of *emotional detachment*, subjects seek to distance themselves from thoughts, feelings, and memories that are too painful to confront. Stolorow (2018) describes this sort of defensive dissociation as a kind of tunnel vision, a narrowing of one's experiential horizons. Like other coping strategies and defense mechanisms, dissociation can be understood as "a routine for nullifying, neutralizing, or at least forestalling the damaging or debilitating effect of facing up to a certain subject matter" (Bach, 1994, p. 61). Defensive dissociation allows agents to distance themselves from events that are terrifying or emotionally unbearable.

It appears that bodily alienation and a diminished sense of bodily ownership are central to defensive dissociation. Following Gallagher (2000), we can understand this sense of ownership as a subject's sense that they are the one who is undergoing an experience (p. 15). That is, the experience has a sense of "mineness" and is presented in a first-personal manner. A sense of bodily ownership ordinarily does not require an explicit or observational consciousness whereby someone regards their body as an object (Gallagher, 2005, p. 29), but instead depends on a more transparent, pre-reflective first-person relationship that someone

has to their body. The sense of "minenses" is at the core of the subjectivity-body-world structure that binds the subject to their surroundings and grounds the subject in the world (Ataria, 2015, p. 204). However, this sense of bodily ownership comes in degrees and can become attenuated. Whereas a sense of unfamiliarity involves a moderately attenuated sense of ownership comprised of abnormal bodily feelings, an experience of *disownership* involves a sense that one's body or one of its parts is alien (Ataria, 2015). One disownership phenomenon commonly experienced by traumatized individuals is out of body experience: a subject may have a sense that the self is located outside their physical body, where it can be safe from the injury being inflicted. Indeed, children who endure psychological, physical, or sexual abuse at the hands of trusted caregivers sometimes attempt to "leave the scene" by observing what is happening to them from a third-person perspective. When a young child "dissociates herself from the assault taking place upon her body and views it, if at all, from a distance, as happening to someone else" (Kennett & Matthews, 2003, p. 45), she attempts to detach from the distressing bodily-affective states she is experiencing. At least in the short term, this sort of detachment from the body "can operate as a flexible defense mechanism, enabling the subject to separate herself from an unbearable reality" (Ataria, 2015, p. 206). Because individuals view the body from a more detached third-person perspective or have a sense of themselves as located outside their physical body (as elevated, or watching events from a distance), the events that are occurring may not seem fully real. One survivor of incestual sexual abuse described it as a separation of body and mind that allowed for separation from her surroundings (Herman, 1992, p. 225). Another subject who had survived rape described the out of body experience she had:

> I left my body at that point. I was over next to the bed, watching this happen…. I dissociated from the helplessness. I was standing next to me and there was just this shell on the bed… There was just a feeling of flatness. I was just there. When I repicture the room, I don't picture it from the bed. I picture it from the side of the bed. That's where I was watching from. (Herman, 1992, p. 43)

During such experiences, a subject may still be aware that the body that they see from a distance is their own, yet their awareness that this is happening *to them* is diminished. In cases where such distancing becomes especially pronounced, it can result in a structural division of the personality into two more or less organized parts, each with its own sense of self. *Compartmentalization* is an attempt to establish boundaries between various aspects of self, so that some emotions and memories that have been registered can be partitioned off and set aside. There has been some debate about whether autobiographical memories are ever completely partitioned off, blocked, or repressed (Otgaar et al., 2019). In any case, it is clear that compartmentalization frequently occurs in a relatively healthy mode, such as when someone sets aside painful feelings after an argument with a friend so that they can effectively teach a philosophy class. So long as the agent acknowledges and processes these feelings after they are done teaching, compartmentalization can help them to function. In instances of

splitting, however, there is a division of the personality into more emotional, trauma-focused parts and "apparently normal" trauma avoidant parts, each with its own sense of self (Martin et al., 2022, p. 3). The subject then alternates between two or more of these different "versions" of the self, which remain unintegrated with each other. Painful experiences and memories may even be split off and relegated to a private or inaccessible part of the self (Harter et al., 1997, p. 849). In some cases, this can lead to the emergence of various alter-personalities and contribute to the onset of dissociative identity disorder (DID), where multiple identities are created to compartmentalize traumatic memories (Ross & Gahan, 1988). The hallmark of such fragmentation is that some alters exhibit little or no awareness or consciousness of other alter-personalities. What is more, different alters typically display contradictory attributes and behavioral dispositions that are particularly difficult to integrate.

Whereas the different "selves" of the subject with DID often lack awareness of one another, it is much more common for traumatized individuals to retain some degree of awareness of these different self-facets. Still, their lack of integration can contribute to disruptions to self-awareness. Along these lines, Van Der Merwe and Swartz (2015) maintain that some individuals who have been traumatized and feel a great deal of shame develop a split between (i) a socially conforming, idealized (false) self, and (ii) the inherently deficient and shameful (authentic) self that they think underlies this false persona. Along similar lines, Harter et al. (1997) maintain that a child who has been abused may come to see the true self as "corroded with inner badness" and in need of being "concealed at all costs" (p. 849). Persistent attempts to be good and to please caregivers lead the child to develop a socially acceptable self. While I agree that shame can prompt splitting, it is important to acknowledge that the development of a false self also can stem from a subject's reluctance to face up to intense negative emotions (e.g., of fear, abandonment, anger, or despair). The false self can be understood as a protective mechanism that facilitates emotional detachment and helps them to conceal their painful feelings from themselves. After all, the false self is strong, hard, and tough, whereas their feelings make salient to them how vulnerable and damaged they are. What is more, it is not only their shame that often remains bypassed, unacknowledged, or unconscious, but also their feelings of anger or fear, deep emotional pain, or a sense of betrayal. The subject may find these feelings so unbearable that they turn to a "false self" as a means of coping and maintaining a functional personality. Like out-of-body experiences, splitting functions as a mode of defense; its purpose "is to protect the traumatized, shamed, and concealed authentic self from being exposed to further harm and by producing another part of the psyche which conceals and compensates for the often unconscious pain experienced by the vulnerable part" (Van der Merwe & Swartz, 2015, p. 371). While these forms of dissociative detachment often prove to be adaptive in the short term, they can make it very difficult for subjects to develop a coherent sense of self. According to Harter et al. (1997), and as I will discuss further in section 4, defensive dissociation also sets the stage for the loss of the subject's *true self* (p. 849).

Another potential harm of trauma is decreased habitual trust, which can contribute to social alienation and decreased self-confidence. The backdrop for an agent's engagement with the world ordinarily is a general sense of being (relatively) "at home" in the world; subjects typically anticipate and navigate social interactions with some degree of "habitual confidence" (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 4). It is important to note that this sort of habitual trust is an example of what Ratcliffe calls an *existential orientation*, i.e., a subject's general sense of their relationship to the world. Some of the existential orientations that Ratcliffe discusses include feelings of connectedness to the world, having a sense of familiarity, and experiencing a sense of belonging. Like other existential feelings, a subject's sense of habitual trust is not itself an attitude toward anything specific, but instead a more general stance that functions as a backdrop for thought and experience. In many cases, it is against this backdrop that individuals have more localized experiences of problematic uncertainty, anxiety, or doubt, and anticipate that specific events will or will not occur (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 5). When habitual trust is present, subjects have a tacit, unreflective sense of what sorts of action possibilities are available in the interpersonal domain. What Roberts and Osler (2024) call "social certainty" gives them a sense that they have the know-how to connect with other people and take steps to ameliorate any difficulties that arise. In many cases, this sense of security is so engrained that subjects are oblivious to it. Indeed, the more at home someone feels in a particular social setting, the less likely they are to realize that this sense of familiarity and habitual trust functions as a backdrop for their interactions and engagements.

However, some subjects who have undergone prolonged relational trauma experience a non-localized loss of trust; "a confident style of anticipation gives way to pervasive and non-localized uncertainty and doubt, and a sense of danger predominates" (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014). It is not simply that they are distrustful of specific people or situations. Instead, this diminished trust partially constitutes their general way of relating to and engaging with their world and shapes the backdrop against which they form attitudes toward specific objects and events. Once this habitual trust begins to dissipate and a subject's confidence begins to dissolve, they may begin to feel disconnected from others and view the social realm as intimidating or threatening. Other persons come to be perceived as potential threats, as agents who can hurt them, or simply as individuals who do not offer affordances for interaction; the traumatized individual is unable to perceive others' empathy for them and therefore does not feel "seen" or understood (Wilde, 2019). Whereas a subject with a greater degree of habitual trust feels confident about engaging with whatever comes next, "the default style of anticipation [for subjects who have endured trauma] becomes that of anxious uncertainty" (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 5). After all, it is not simply that other people have failed to help, but also that they have been active perpetrators of harm. Particularly when those who have inflicted harm are close family members or other people commonly assumed to be "safe," interpersonal trauma leads to an erosion of trust (Ratcliffe,

Ruddell, & Smith, 2014). This attenuated habitual trust may cause them to lose confidence, both in other people and in themselves, and lead to social withdrawal, feelings of hopelessness, or a sense of estrangement. Social settings may seem especially unpredictable, uncontrollable, and threatening, and subjects may experience "social doubt" (Roberts & Osler, 2024): an interpersonal world that previously seemed dependable increasingly is disclosed as dangerous and inhospitable to human relationships. If the social realm appears especially daunting and the subject experiences themselves as unable to engage in a habitual practical performance, they may lose faith in their ability to engage smoothly in social interaction and begin to feel awkward or self-conscious. This diminished trust in themselves (and their own abilities or capacities) can be understood in terms of diminished self-esteem or self-efficacy.

This diminished habitual trust often is accompanied by feelings of social disconnection and deep loneliness. Someone who desires love but has been seriously injured by loved ones in the past may find it difficult to form close connections; reminded of the pain that such relations caused them in the past, they may be inclined to withdraw their feelings (Elias, 1985, p. 65). Although they desire and crave interpersonal contact and connection, they also are inclined to withdraw from it. Roberts and Krueger (2021) describe loneliness as an emotion of absence. What feels out of reach are important social goods, such as companionship, physical affection, romance, friendship, and the opportunity to interact with others (p. 191). As a result, they also are cut off from deeper social goods, such as being intellectually and emotionally supported by others, receiving assurance and validation from others, and being able to cultivate aspects of their identity that have an essentially social form. These authors rightly note that an individual may feel deeply lonely even when around other people, when the social environment appears not to be receptive to their social overtures. When social participation feels difficult or impossible to attain, agents may feel that they cannot fully "be themselves" and become more constrained and inhibited in their interactions with others.

Dissociative detachment and diminished habitual trust often are mutually reinforcing. One the one hand, defensive detachment from their body and from others can lead to a lack of interpersonal connectedness and attunement, which contributes to an erosion of habitual trust. Gallagher (2005) has emphasized that social cognition is fully embodied and subjects' pre-reflective capacities for understanding others are anchored in bodily attunement. When a subject sees someone else act, their own sensory-motor system is activated in a way that mirrors the perceived action of the other person. This sort of bodily responsiveness or "motor resonance" enables perception of their social environment that is quick and reliable (Hutto, 2004, p. 551). Thus, someone who detaches from their own body or feels disconnected from it may find it more difficult to connect with others or trust their capacity to engage in effective social interactions. On the other hand, diminished habitual trust and lack of a sense of safety may very well contribute to detachment and dissociation (Herman, 1992). After all, a subject

who does not trust (a) that they can confront and manage painful feelings, or (b) that others will answer their emotional needs, may very well attempt to detach from or evade such feelings. Disruptions to social relationships also can make it more difficult for subjects to develop a clearer sense of how they feel and what they want, insofar as it cuts them off from constructive dialogue with others. Without the encouragement and support of others, they may feel daunted and overwhelmed by the task of shaping and maintaining their perspective on the world, regulating their emotions, and choosing how to spend their time (Roberts & Krueger, 2021, p. 197). What is more, the detachment or disconnection associated with dissociation makes it less likely that subjects can engage in the sorts of relationships that would allow them to rebuild their trust, both in themselves and in others, and reconnect with people.

3. Relational Authenticity and the Capacities that Undergird It

Can dissociation and attenuated trust make it more difficult for traumatized individuals to act authentically? One might think that the answer to this question depends significantly on how one conceptualizes 'authenticity,' and there are numerous accounts presented in the philosophical literature (Feldman & Hazlett, 2013). According to one conception, being authentic involves avoiding pretense and being true to oneself. The authentic agent acts in the way that they genuinely want to act, living on their own terms (rather than conforming to other people's demands and expectations). Inauthenticity, in contrast, involves posturing or unthinkingly adhering to social norms. Velleman (2002) describes the inauthentic person as a "poseur," someone who "in general conforms himself to the demands and expectations of others" (p. 97). Such an individual allows the judgments of others to define them and conducts their life according to customary standards rather than being guided by their own freely chosen values.

A second conception of authenticity centers around wholeheartedness: actions are authentic to the extent that the agent is wholehearted in performing them. Frankfurt (1988, 1999) conceptualizes wholeheartedness as a matter of identifying with one's effective first-order desires (the desires that move one to action) by way of second-order volitions. Suppose, for example, that Avery not only wants to get good grades in school, but also embraces this first-order desire and approves of it as a motivating factor (in the sense that she wants it to be effective in action). According to Frankfurt, when Avery embraces her desire to get good grades, she wills that this desire guide her conduct and thereby makes it "more truly [her] own" (Frankfurt, 1988, p. 18), so that the first-order desire to get good grades has become part of her self-conception. Along similar lines, Lynch (2004) maintains that an agent identifies with a desire when it reflects what they care about and the kind of person they wish to be (p. 125). The general idea is that wholehearted agency involves identifying with, embracing, or endorsing the desires that effectively guide one's actions. The authentic agent

is moved to act by what they care about. Inauthenticity, in contrast, involves ambivalence or inner conflict, so that it is unclear which of the agent's desires they embrace or endorse. Frankfurt (1999) describes the ambivalent agent as someone who "is inclined in one direction, and he is inclined in the contrary direction as well; and his attitude toward these inclinations is unsettled" (p. 100).

The third conception holds that authenticity is a matter of existential self-knowledge and honest self-assessment. An agent is authentic to the extent that they acknowledge their human condition, i.e., their dual nature as both an objective facticity and a subjective transcendence (Sartre, 1992; Weberman, 2011). On the one hand, humans encounter factical constraints on their freedom; there are various attributes or features that agents have not chosen and over which they lack full control. One important factical feature of an agent's existence, which will be relevant for the discussion of relational trauma, is the body, which is presented partly as "an inert presence as a passive object among other objects" (Sartre, 1992, p. 100) that is susceptible to harm at the hands of other people. On the other hand, humans are transcendent by virtue of their freedom and their ability to surpass what actually is the case. The authentic agent both honestly accepts their human condition and acknowledges the full range of choices that are open to them. They own (and own up to) what they are doing or becoming and face up to their own limitations and vulnerability. To exhibit inauthenticity (bad faith) is to engage in a kind of self-deception that revolves around this double property of facticity-transcendence: the agent conflates facticity with transcendence (or vice versa) by regarding what is factical as transcendent, or what is transcendent as factical. For example, an agent might not acknowledge that many of the unpleasant aspects or events that have shaped the course of their lives are simply beyond their control (Weberman, 2011, p. 882). Alternatively, they might tell themselves that they are trapped by circumstances and fail to face up to the fact that they have far more options than they are inclined to admit.

According to the fourth conception, authenticity centrally involves spontaneity: the actions of the authentic agent unselfconsciously and unreflectively express what they care about. Feldman and Hazlett (2013) maintain that according to this account, being true to oneself is not a matter of introspection or thinking about oneself; instead, one simply "is oneself", without deliberation or reflection. An inauthentic agent, in contrast, is introspective, self-obsessed, and neurotically self-focused; they try to determine what would best express their "true self" before they act. However, these efforts to act on the basis of knowledge regarding which action would express one's "true self" are doomed to failure. Anybody who attempts to guide themselves via this sort of self-knowledge is faking it, pretending to "be themself," acting *like* themself. In some sense, they are like Velleman's "poseur," only they are trying to live up to a self-imposed, pre-established image of who they are (which may or may not line up with societal norms).

While there are important differences (and even possible tensions) between these accounts, all point to a general theme: authentic agents conduct their life in accordance with what they care about and their actions are expressive of their genuine cares and commitments. My aim is not to defend a particular conception of authenticity. Instead, my discussion aims to reveal how dissociation and attenuated habitual trust (and their interplay) potentially pose obstacles for authenticity however one understands it. It is worth noting that authenticity comes in degrees. As Walker and Mackenzie note, "authenticity is achieved in a piecemeal way over time, and we can be more or less authentic at different times and in different domains" (Walker & Mackenzie, 2020, p. 111). Even more crucial for my discussion is a recognition that authenticity is fundamentally *relational*. Even though authentic agency may require that an individual display a certain degree of independence (so that they can resist unthinkingly conforming to social demands), it is not a solitary pursuit.

Recall that for thinkers in the existentialist tradition, authenticity is a matter of owning, and owning up to, what one is doing (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018). Often this is interpreted in individualistic terms, as a matter of choosing for oneself rather than allowing others to define one's life and actions. One worry about an overly individualistic understanding of authenticity is that it implies that relationships with other people lead agents astray from their fundamental life projects and prevent them from enacting meaning for themselves. It is worth noting that the role of interpersonal relationships in shaping people's authenticity is inherently ambiguous. While it is true that unthinking conformity or adherence to others' expectations poses a threat to authenticity, it also should be acknowledged that agents learn how to be "true to themselves", and to avoid pretense, in the context of close relationships with family and friends. Likewise, agents frequently figure out what they genuinely care about, and which of their desires they wish to embrace or endorse, via interpersonal engagement; they define and shape their identities partly via intimate dialogue with the cast of characters in our lives. Figuring out how they want to live often depends not just on self-directed interventions that they undertake on their own, but also on "participation in shared, enriching, enlivening, and often joyous social situations" (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018, p. 142). This is because other people "provide a backdrop against which [agents] come to understand what matters to [them] and aspire to act accordingly" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 86).

When it comes to establishing authenticity, important breakthroughs frequently occur over the course of interpersonal interactions. For example, when struggling to determine what to do, what course of action best fits with what matters to you, who you are, or what you want to be, others can help (De Haan, 2020, p. 350). In talking to a friend, a subject may gain clarity about what actually matters most; in noticing their raised eyebrow, a subject might realize that they have been fooling themselves about their feelings or vulnerabilities or are failing to acknowledge the full range of options that are available. People often turn to others for reassurance or support when they doubt the reliability of their own judgments and

thought processes, and they look to others to help them process and negotiate difficult events and experiences (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 6). Good relationships can allow agents to engage in a different sort of relationship with themselves (De Haan, 2020, p. 350) and potentially engage in more honest self-assessment. This can help them to avoid self-deception, accept their limitations and vulnerabilities, and acknowledge the full range of choices that are open to them. Lastly, spontaneous and unselfconscious action is supported and sustained by relationships of mutual trust. It is typically in the context of close interpersonal relationships that people are comfortable enough to just "be themselves." Thus, the shared practices through which agents develop a sense of identity need not promote conformity (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018), but instead appear to be crucial for authentic agency.

But should authenticity be understood as *causally* relational or *constitutively* relational? To suppose that authenticity is causally relational is to suppose that relationships and social environments operate as background conditions or contributory factors to the realization of authenticity. To suppose that authenticity is constitutively relational is to suppose that social conditions must be mentioned in the definition of authenticity; that is, what it means to be authentic cannot be spelled out without direct reference to a person's social environment, position, or standing. Self-identity is not separate from or prior to social relationships and socialization. My understanding of relational authenticity does not fall neatly into either camp. On the one hand, social relationships are more than mere contributory elements to authenticity; it is only in the context of these relationships that agents can develop and sustain the various competences that undergird authentic agency. Walker and Mackenzie (2020) suggest that such competencies are inherently relational "because they are developed and sustained in social relations and in the context of normative structures and practices of social recognition" (p. 109). We cannot come to understand who are, what we prefer, and what we value, simply by way of introspection. Instead, "we come to understand ourselves, and what activities and interactions we find fulfilling and meaningful, through action and interaction with others over time" (Walker & Mackenzie, 2020, p. 111). Close relationships with others can alleviate cognitive and affective burdens by offering a judgment-free setting in which subjects can vent stress, talk about their fears, or vet their ideas (Roberts & Krueger, 2021, p. 192). On the other hand, there is an important sense in which authenticity is an internal matter. Acting authentically often involves emancipating oneself to some extent from social forces and the immediate reactions of others rather than simply succumbing to social expectations. Authenticity, as I understand it, is deeply *socially embedded*: "we come to understand ourselves, and what activities and interactions we find fulfilling and meaningful, through action and interaction with others over time" (Walker & Mackenzie, 2020, p. 111).

There are a range of psychological competencies that undergird relational authenticity. First, the capacity for self-reflection enables a subject to introspect, consider their values, and evaluatively assess their desires, beliefs, and actions. Rather than conforming to societal

expectations, they engage in introspection and consider how they wish to live. Careful self-reflection helps them to determine which of their desires they want to embrace or endorse and thereby paves the way for wholehearted action. Through self-reflection (often in dialogue with others), agents also come to understand themselves in a more honest and lucid way (Fletcher, 2013, p. 88). They are able to face up to their own limitations and unpleasant feelings, own up the impact of their attitudes and behavior, and assess what sorts of options are available. Self-reflection thereby contributes to existential self-knowledge and honest self-assessment.

Another related capacity is the ability to construct an autobiographical narrative. Through self-narration, subjects learn to tell a relatively coherent story about their lives and can come to an understanding of their past, the future life they desire, and how their past relates to their future. An agent's personal narrative about their life provides a way for them to understand the wider significance of what they have done in the past and to imagine their possible future actions (Hutto, 2016, p. 25). In developing a self-narrative, the individual creates a sense of continuity over time as well as coherent connections among self-relevant life events (Harter et al., 1997, p. 849). This can help them to avoid unthinking conformity to societal expectations, gain a sense of what they care about, and gauge which of their desires and commitments they want to guide their actions. A coherent self-narrative also can facilitate honest self-assessment, make agents more aware of their own shortcomings, and expand their awareness of available action-possibilities. This sort of narrative can help agents avoid self-deception and cultivate an awareness of how different self-aspects relate to one another.

Authenticity also depends on emotion regulation. Associated processes of cultivating, dampening, or modifying affective states aim at influencing which emotions one has, when one has them, and how one experiences and expresses these feelings (Henden, 2023). To engage in emotion regulation, an agent needs to discern which feelings to embrace or cultivate, which to suppress, and which to redirect. Emotion regulation thereby embodies a concern for making sense of oneself and figuring out how one wants to feel, live, and act. Emotion regulation thereby involves a process of observing one's feelings, "working through" them, and developing healthier ways of experiencing emotions and relating to others (Sherman, 1999, p. 323). Over the course of modulating their emotional condition, an agent develops a better sense of what they care about and what really matters to them. This sort of emotional growth can be integral to the development of self-insight.

In addition, authenticity involves being open to unfamiliarity and having a sense of adventure. Authentic agents are open to being in unusual, novel, or foreign situations; they feel strong enough to take risks and navigate the world's problems and moral dangers (Fletcher, 2013, p. 91) and are relatively comfortable with uncertainty, ambiguity, unpredictability, and paradox. Exploration and risk-taking often takes place in the context

of interpersonal relationships and allows agents to experiment, gain new know-how, and gauge what matters most to them. This sense of adventure and openness to unfamiliarity can pave the way for spontaneous action whereby an agent un-self-reflectively expresses what they care about and how they wish to conduct their lives. Taking risks also can help them to gain a sense of their personal strengths and weaknesses, paving the way for increased existential self-knowledge.

Lastly, relational authenticity is undergirded by a recognition of interdependency. Authentic agents acknowledge that they are dependent on other people for self-creation, just as others are dependent on them. As noted already, the interdependency of human agents can promote problematic modes of conformity; however, it also can allow agents to gain a sense of what they value, what they want to commit themselves to, and which of their desires they wish to embrace. Recognition of their interdependency with others also includes recognition and acknowledgment of the fact that they "are inextricably embedded in social environments" (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018, p. 138), and actively engaged with other people. This is a key element of human facticity. Thus, gaining existential self-knowledge involves "facing up to the richness and complexity of our situated existence that comes from being in-the-world-with-others" (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018, p. 141). An authentic agent is one who acknowledges their own embodied nature, their connectedness to others, and their finitude and vulnerability. As we will see, this includes facing up to the fact that other people can cause them great injury.

4. Disruptions to Authenticity Competencies in Cases of Trauma

In section 2, I discussed the dissociative detachment and diminished habitual trust that commonly result from trauma. In section 3, I argued that while authenticity has been conceptualized in a variety of ways, it is best understood as relational and as undergirded by various competencies. In this section, I discuss how the interplay between dissociation and attenuated habitual trust can create challenges for self-reflection and self-narration, lead to self-deception, and cause traumatized individuals to fear unfamiliarity and evade their interdependency with others. Because these authenticity competencies are underdeveloped, agents find it difficult to act in ways that express their genuine desires and commitments.

First, dissociation and attenuated habitual trust can create barriers for self-reflection. I have suggested that those who experience trauma may look to dissociation as a means of evading (and avoiding facing up to) events that are terrifying or emotionally unbearable. When dissociation becomes one of the central ways that the subject deals with distressing memories and feelings, it becomes customary for a subject to avoid reflecting on their past experiences or considering their impact on their current personality and behavior. For example, a child who relies heavily on dissociation to manage painful feelings such as grief,

apprehension, or anger (Harrist, 2006, p. 108) may find it difficult to move toward resolution of these (potentially conflicting) feelings or achieve a fuller understanding of what their all-things-considered values are. Because painful emotional experiences are not fully felt or articulated, they cannot be integrated with the individual's self-understanding. What is more, due to attenuated habitual trust, social settings are more likely to appear "daunting, oppressive, unpredictable, or uncontrollable" (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 4). Rather than feeling comfortably immersed in their interpersonal surroundings, these agents may feel acutely vulnerable and estranged from others. In addition, they may have a sense that their experiences are incommensurable with the experiences of others and that family members and friends could not possibly understand how they feel. This cuts them off from opportunities to talk through their desires, memories, and feelings with others, and thereby reinforces their emotional detachment. Socially scaffolded processes of self-reflection are less likely to occur.

Second, diminished habitual trust and dissociation can make it difficult for traumatized individuals to construct an autobiographical narrative. Along these lines, Ratcliffe, Ruddell, and Smith (2014) maintain that trauma disrupts an agent's life story, which is comprised of a meaningful interpretation of their past activities, relationships, achievements, and failures. This story also involves a sense of where the agent is headed together with a sense of their current cares, commitments, and hopes for the future. These authors maintain that the intelligibility of life narratives and life projects depends upon habitual trust; this background sense of trust needs to be present for agents to have a sense of a meaningful future and feel that it is possible for them to move forward in some kind of meaningful way. However, when a traumatized individual looks ahead, the future is not ordered in terms of meaningful projects (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 8). As a result, their life story is curtailed and their ability to engage in self-narration is impeded. Gaining a sense of what they care about, gauging which of their desires and commitments they want to guide their action, and undertaking honest self-assessment (with the help of others) all become more difficult.

These difficulties with self-narration are compounded by the defensive dissociation that is common among individuals who have endured prolonged relational trauma. Central to self-narration is autobiographical memory, which ordinarily helps a subject to create a continuous identity and provides a record of their actions and experiences as their life story unfolds through time. Sifting through and evaluating memories, externalizing some and embracing others, all play an important role in coming to terms with painful events and achieving equilibrium among the different elements of the self. However, due to dissociative detachment, agents may remember traumatic scenes from a detached view outside themselves (Axmacher et al., 2010). As a result, these painful past events cannot become part of their self-image nor are they re-evaluated and integrated into a narrative that is continuous with other life events.

In many cases, the autobiographical stories of traumatized individuals involve a high degree of "narrative distance" (Gallagher & Cole, 2011). This concept is used to indicate how far removed the narrator is from the events being narrated and involves several key aspects. One aspect is perspectival distance, which depends on whether a story is told from the first person or the third person; typically there is less narrative distance in autobiographical narratives. Another aspect is evaluative/affective distance, which is measured in terms of the valence of the narrator's evaluations of events or how the narrator feels about them. All narrative recounting is an interpretation and involves selection, whereby some aspects of past events are highlighted and others are left out of the story. In autobiographical narratives, one may ask about the distance between the self who narrates and the self who is narrated; the narrated self is in some sense the object of the narrative. In autobiographical narratives with a high degree of narrative distance, there is a higher degree of *impersonality* between the narrator and narrated self. Gallagher and Cole (2011) propose that this involves regarding the self that is described in the narrative as "more like another person (not me, not the true me)" (p. 153).

In their autobiographical narratives, traumatized individuals often describe themselves and the events that occurred from the outside, as if they happened to another person; they may remember the details of what happened to them in a distorted manner, for example, without the associated emotions (Axmacher et al., 2010, p. 1). Narratives are more likely to be framed in terms of descriptions of actions and events rather than a description of the subject's own mental states. Thus, these life narratives may do little to help subjects make sense of their thoughts and feelings surrounding what has occurred. Along these lines, Axmacher and colleagues (2010) maintain that "the specific memory deformations following a trauma can be most accurately conceptualized not as failures to recall specific information, but as an impairment to integrate these experiences with self-referential processes" (Axmacher et al., 2010, p. 4). Because agents do not have a sense that these memories relate to them or their life, the personal relevance of these past events is not fully appreciated, understood, or integrated with other aspects of the agent's life story.

Due to this lack of contextualization and the fact that memories of traumatic events have not been integrated into the agent's life story, they may be triggered out of the blue or arise without context. (Axmacher et al., 2010, p. 1). In some cases, these unbidden memories play an overly significant role in shaping the life narratives of traumatized individuals (Bernsten, 2010). Alternatively, because traumatic events have not been contextualized, the agent may have difficulty remembering them. This lack of contextualization and the fact that the events have not been integrated into a structured life narrative can make it difficult for agents to gain an understanding of how these past events impact their current attitudes, behaviors, and relationships. Along these lines, Ratcliffe, Ruddell, and Smith (2014) maintain that an agent whose memories have not been contextualized will continue to confront these past experiences without being able to negotiate them (p. 8). What this means, in part, is that the

memories of these past experiences will continue to cause pain and to impact the subject's life in ways that they do not understand. This not only interferes with self-narration, but also poses a threat to existential self-knowledge and wholehearted agency. And because autobiographical memories serve a directive function, insofar as they allow an agent to predict what will happen in the future and gauge which actions likely will lead to desired outcomes (Axmacher et al., 2010, p. 6), disruptions to memory can contribute to diminished habitual trust. Agents may have an increased sense that the future is unpredictable since they are unable to fit past events into an intelligible narrative. What is more, these disruptions to memory may erode their sense of sharing a common past with others and thereby reinforce social alienation and an attenuation of habitual trust.

Third, the splitting that sometimes occurs due to dissociation and pronounced compartmentalization can lead to self-deception and prompt the creation of a "false self"; this can interfere significantly with the development of existential self-knowledge. Earlier I suggested that being vulnerable and susceptible to harm at the hands of other people is part of the "lot" of being human, i.e., an aspect of facticity. Past events are "givens" that are beyond a subject's control and cannot be transcended by denying that they occurred. However, defensive dissociation involves an evasion of unwanted or uncomfortable bodily feelings and a reluctance to face up to one's own vulnerability or the painful realities surrounding past events. What is more, insofar as "splitting" involves enacting traits and behaviors that do not reflect how one really feels or what one truly thinks, this can interfere with wholehearted agency. According to Van der Merwe and Swartz (2015), splitting also can be understood as a matter of conforming to social expectations. Recall that these theorists maintain that shame is central to the splitting process: to ensure that their self-presentation answers to others' expectations and desires, traumatized individuals continually monitor their behavior and prevent themselves from expressing their true thoughts and feelings (p. 362). This conforming, idealized self that the traumatized individual enacts thereby involves a kind of pretense; this is one sense in which it is "false." What is more, an agent who presents a "false self" during interpersonal interactions is not sharing their true thoughts and feelings when they converse with others. Instead, their defensive dissociation helps to create a disguise that masks both their true feelings as well as their emotional withdrawal.

This tendency to hide one's genuine thoughts and feelings from others not only is exacerbated by diminished habitual trust, but also has the potential to sustain an agent's felt disconnection from others. If an agent lacks trust that their basic desires and needs are acceptable, and that their feelings and memories are manageable, they do not feel sufficiently confident to express themselves. Due to attenuated habitual trust, they may have a sense that if they were to share how they feel, others would not understand them or do their best to help them. What is more, they may not have sufficient confidence in themselves to make them comfortable with expressing their true needs and desires. In some cases, they may be

aware, to some extent, that they are being "fake" or phony; this can contribute to increasing doubts about their own ability to sustain meaningful social connections.

Relatedly, dissociative detachment and diminished habitual trust can create barriers for emotion regulation. I have suggested that emotion regulation helps people to gain a sense of who they are and what they care about. Ordinarily, emotion regulation is supported by other people, and by unfolding social interactions, throughout the lifespan (Sherman, 1999). In dialogue with others, agents become more aware of the complexity and nuance of their outlook and feelings. However, if someone feels threatened or becomes socially withdrawn, they may be unable to "participate in interpersonal relations of a kind that more usually serve to regulate experience, thought, and activity" (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 9). Rather than "working through" their feelings, an agent may simply detach from painful emotions; this prevents them from developing healthier ways of experiencing and expressing emotions. And because they have diminished trust in others, they will be reluctant to rely on social scaffolds for emotion regulation. What is more, they may be unable to retreat from abusive relationships or escape interpersonal interactions that trigger negative affective states. These dynamics can prevent traumatized individuals from exercising affective agency and managing their emotional condition, which in turn can interfere with self-insight and authenticity.

Fourth, due to attenuated habitual trust, traumatized individuals may be less comfortable with experimentation, risk-taking, or immersing themselves in unusual situations. Because they anticipate threats and dangers, they may fear that which is unfamiliar and tend to stick with the "routine and predictable" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 91). They also may lack a sense of adventure and be less likely to anticipate the future as a source of open possibilities. Their orientation toward the future is altered, so that they confront a world that is incompatible with the possibility of moving forward (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 8). An authentic agent sets their own course in life and acts according to desires that they have embraced. However, it will be difficult for a subject to take risks and try out new modes of living if they lack a sense of a meaningful future and cannot see how to move forward. A traumatized individual may even have a sense that their life has already ended because it is no longer intelligible to them. This dynamic can be exacerbated by dissociative detachment and bodily alienation; if an agent has a sense of being disconnected from their own body, this can further erode their habitual confidence in their own ability to navigate new and unfamiliar situations. Discomfort with experimentation and risk-taking also can be reinforced via social alienation. Ordinarily, agents undertake goal-directed activities, experiment with new things, and embark on adventures together with others. However, "where there is pervasive uncertainty, where others cease to be dependable, where the world is unsafe and one's abilities are in doubt, projects collapse" (Ratcliffe, Ruddell, & Smith, 2014, p. 7). An agent who experiences the world as a source of dangers and threats is likely to be risk-averse and especially sensitive to the possibility of injury. This will make it more

difficult for them to engage in the sort of experimentation and risk-taking that Fletcher (2013) maintains is important for finding out what sort of life one truly wants to live.

Lastly, dissociation and diminished habitual trust can lead to an evasion of interdependency. The notion that agents depend on others to create and shape their identity (e.g., through dialogue) is a key aspect of relational authenticity (Fletcher, 2013). Inauthenticity, in contrast, can be understood as a "denial or a running away from one's embodied intersubjective relations" (Gallagher, Morgan, & Rokotnitz, 2018, p. 141). Agents who exhibit dissociative detachment attempt to evade their own dependency on others as well as their embodiment. This is not surprising given that traumatized individuals have encountered a hostile social environment and, in many cases, been exposed to some sort of social isolation, humiliation, or physical abuse. An agent who has experienced severe and ongoing relational trauma may want to distance themselves from the fact that they are embodied and socially embedded, that they are vulnerable, and that other people can hurt them. However, as noted already, vulnerability to injury at the hands of other people is part of the "lot" of being human. This reluctance to face up to their own vulnerability can contribute to self-deception and pose difficulties for existential knowledge. Meanwhile, attenuated habitual trust often reinforces their felt estrangement, detachment, and social alienation. In addition to feeling that nobody can understand their predicament, traumatized individuals may have a sense of being cut off from possibilities for interpersonal interaction; they may even experience other people as a constant source of threat (Wilde, 2019). This loss of trust in other people is likely to be especially pronounced in cases where people close to the individual (e.g., close family members) are the ones who have caused them significant harm and put them in situation where they cannot avoid the horrifying things happening to them. Because traumatized individuals often are unable to perceive others' empathy and concern for them (Wilde, 2019), they may be less likely to depend on others for self-creation (or establish a connection that would allow others to depend on them). Instead, they experience a pervasive loss of connection and trust that makes it especially difficult for them to engage in the kinds of interpersonal interactions where they can express how they feel, come to terms with what has happened to them, and reflect on what they want their life to look like moving forward.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that prolonged relational trauma can result in dissociative detachment and diminished trust, and that the interplay between these phenomena can pose serious obstacles for authentic agency. Because agents attempt to evade the harm they have endured and experience both bodily alienation and social alienation, they often find it quite difficult to develop and sustain the competencies that undergird relational authenticity. Such competencies include self-reflection, self-narration, openness to unfamiliarity, and a

recognition of their interdependency with others. Because these competencies are underdeveloped, traumatized individuals may not have a very good sense of what sort of life they want to lead and struggle to come to terms with their past; their understanding of who they are and what sort of life they want to lead is likely to be limited. Thus, the discussion presented here highlights a potential harm of relational trauma that has not received much attention among philosophers.

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