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Williams and Cusk on Technologies of the Self

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Abstract The rejection of a "characterless" moral self is central to some of Bernard Williams' most important contributions to philosophy. By the time of *Truth and Truthfulness*, he works instead with a model of the self constituted and stabilized out of more primitive materials through deliberation and in concert with others that takes inspiration from Diderot. Although this view of the self raises some difficult questions, it serves as a useful starting point for thinking about the process of developing an authentic moral point of view in the context of contemporary living. In what follows, I begin to fill out and extend this picture of the self and its related notion of authenticity by exploring some of the "technologies of the self" at play in Rachel Cusk's recent work (primarily, the Outline trilogy, *Coventry*, *Second Place*, and "The Stuntman") that ask us to rethink the possibility and importance of stability; seek a way of constituting oneself and one's values outside the confining structures of traditional narrative (focusing instead on a framework that might be provided by the visual arts); and give a different role to the sort of internalized other Williams sees as being at work in the mechanisms of shame.

Keywords Bernard Williams · Rachel Cusk · moral development · moral point of view · authenticity

1 Introduction

The rejection of a "characterless" conception of the moral self is central to much of Bernard Williams' thinking:[1] it demands the kind of attention to individual projects and integrity he claims utilitarianism cannot understand;[2] it precludes putting much weight on appeals to the agreements of identityless bargainers at the foundations of political life *à la* Rawls (1971), forcing engagement with the variety of political realism he explores in Williams (2005);[3] and it is closely connected—perhaps only a variation on the theme—to the idea that the constraints of rationality underdetermine how one should live, which Miranda Fricker has recently argued is Williams' fundamental presupposition.[4]

Once this characterless conception of the moral self has been abandoned, questions naturally arise about who and what the moral self—if it can be properly distinguished from the self *simpliciter*—is (like) and how its (moral) point of view emerges and develops.

The socioeconomic and political conditions under which one's self becomes "charactered" inevitably play an important role in the subconscious determination of this character and perspective: one doesn't *choose* (at least initially) whether to find being hard-working or pious, for example, virtuous and admirable or slavish and naïve.[5] Williams has rightfully been admired for the attention he pays to these background conditions of real human life, in which one is always already awash in a sea of commitments, desirings, and aversions, as well as for his consideration of ethical thinking that takes place while immersed in this sea.[6] But some aspects of one's moral point of view are formed and deformed more consciously by the actions of the self itself (often in

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[1] See, e.g, (Williams 1993: 94-95) for a discussion of this conception of the moral self.

[2] See (Smart and Williams 1973: 99*ff*.).

[3] See, e.g., (Geuss 2008) for more on political philosophy from this kind of realist perspective.

[4] See (Fricker 2020: 921). If Fricker's notion of "ethical freedom" is as closely tied to the rejection of the characterless moral self as I'm suggesting here, the characterless self may also be related to "internal reasons, the relativism of distance, and the porous borders of philosophy and history" in roughly the same ways Fricker suggests.

[5] Or to think that politeness is the supreme virtue (Ernaux 1998: 55).

[6] See, e.g., (Williams 1985: 116-119).

concert with others), and this type of developmental process requires another sort of attention and focus.

In his final major work, *Truth and Truthfulness* (2002), Williams gives this kind of attention to two pictures of the self's reflective relation to itself and the role an agent might play in actively discovering (Rousseau) or determining (Diderot) an authentic point of view that may form the basis of a specifically moral self. Williams rejects Rousseau's attempt to forge a path from the honesty and sincerity needed to discover one's true self to the advent of individual virtue and harmonious social life as being mistakenly based on another supposition of a characterless moral self underlying each person's collection of "idiosyncratic peculiarities."[7] He nevertheless aims to preserve the ideal of authenticity that Rousseau strives to attain through his self-investigations. The subsequent shift to Diderot's picture, which sees the self as constituted through a process of stabilizing or "steadying" inchoate tendencies and desires through deliberation, provides Williams with a more realistic model of the self, as well as the means to make sense of authenticity via one's unique resistances to various forms of modification to one's self proposed during such deliberative processes.

Although this Diderot-inspired picture of the self has definite advantages over Rousseau's model, it has its own problems as well—in particular those that come along with the steadying process—and it is very clearly offered by Williams only as a general sketch of the self and its development that later, more detailed investigations might fill in.[8] My aim in what follows is to point out a few directions this sort of further investigation might fruitfully follow.

"Technologies of the self,"[9] like those involved in the constitution of the self in the Diderot-inspired picture, are a major theme in the recent work of Rachel Cusk,[10] and I'll be examining ways we might enhance and extend Williams' view by attending to this aspect of her work and letting it guide us. This attention will show the value of occasionally destabilizing the self created in conversation with others (Section 5.1);[11] raise questions about the role of narrative in the project of self- and value-constitution, while aiming to recast a framework from the visual arts in its place (Section 5.2); and find a new relation to an internalized other (akin to the one Williams associates with the mechanisms of shame) that might serve the end of the safe creation of an authentic self (Section 5.3).[12] Given her concern with these (and other) technologies of the self, it's apparent that Cusk might usefully be put in conversation with Williams and other figures in the broadly analytic tradition who aim to think through the development and formation of the moral self and its "charactered" point of view. My hope is that this preliminary exploration of some themes from her work might lead to such further engagement.

To begin, I'll offer some initial explanation of a number of the concepts and ideas I've been employing in this Introduction. In particular, I'll discuss the very idea of finding a specifically moral point of view in Williams; expand on the notion of the characterless moral self (both in Section 2); and give an outline and critique of the Rousseau- and Diderot-inspired pictures of the self (Sections 3 and 4). Both the difficulties with and the incompleteness of the Diderot-inspired model will then lead into the discussion of the aspects of Cusk's work noted above.

2 The Moral Point of View and the Characterless Self

Because Williams begins his most widely read book, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, by aiming to expand the range of considerations that might be brought to bear on "Socrates' Question" (i.e., How should one live?) to such a degree that philosophy on its own will likely not be able to provide an answer, it's reasonable to think that an appeal to a specifically moral point of view in connection with Williams' work redraws boundaries he aims to do away with. That is, it's natural to wonder whether anything other than one's whole point of view could suffice for contributing answers to the question of how one should live and, therefore, to moral philosophy's foundational question. As natural as this concern may be, it can be set aside in what follows.

It's true that Williams' (1985) takes Socrates' Question to be an important one for philosophers to address and true that he suggests that it is the correct starting point for moral philosophy, but it's also a major claim of the whole book that Socrates' question isn't already an ethical one.[13] This being the case, we can expect that an agent's moral point of view can be distinguished from other aspects of his or her view of the world insofar as it makes distinct contributions to the question of how that agent should live.[14] Just how idiosyncratic a properly moral point of view can be is another question, however.

Williams argues that philosophers ranging from Plato to Kant (and presumably beyond) have held a view that takes moral selves to be as alike as happy families.[15]

[7] See (Williams 2002: 180).

[8] *Cf.* (Williams 2002: 200).

[9] This phrase is from (Foucault 1988).

[10] I'll be drawing on *The Last Supper* (Cusk 2009), the Outline trilogy (Cusk 2014, 2016, 2018), *Coventry* (Cusk 2019b), *Second Place* (Cusk 2021), and "The Stuntman" (Cusk 2023).

[11] See Dover (2022) for an interesting discussion of a wide range of views in the vicinity of the "conversational self."

[12] *Cf.* (Williams 1993: 103, 219-223) for Williams on shame.

[13] See (Williams 1985: 3, 28) for discussions of these two aspects of the status of Socrates' question.

[14] (Williams 1985: 127)

[15] For some questions about the historical accuracy of Williams' attributing this conception of the moral self Plato, see, e.g., (Long 2007: 174-175). Kant's distinction between "temperament" and "character" in the anthropology lectures may also be thought to provide valuable

> In this picture, I am provided by reason, or perhaps by religious illumination [...], with a knowledge of the moral law, and I need only the will to obey it.[16]

The characterless moral self further plays a role in capturing the idea that—for the purposes of moral deliberation—my personal inclinations are somehow to be set aside as reflecting either selfish desires or insignificant contingencies of my upbringing—similar to brainwashing—if they haven't either been reconceived as stemming from more universal aims or subjected to a critique from the perspective of pure reason and reaffirmed as now freely chosen.[17]

This notion of the self likely persists, at least in part, because it offers a very natural way of thinking about authenticity: e.g., "Who am I really? Well, not *just* someone who likes milk, painting, and nature. I'll have to look behind all this to find my real self." The trick for someone who believes in a real self like this waiting to be found (e.g., Rousseau, according to Williams) is to know where to draw the line between these sorts of contingencies and one's "real" core in such a way as to maintain one's individuality or, alternatively, to subscribe to the view that the self's moral core is essentially characterless—the same for all virtuous people.

Williams recognizes the appeal of this ideal of authenticity,[18] but has in common with much modern thinking about the self the rejection of the idea that there is a real, authentic self just waiting to be found. The corresponding trick for someone taking this kind of line is to capture the ideal of authenticity in conjunction with a self that is essentially constructed by (or in) an agent's actions. On Williams' account, this can be achieved by appeal to some form of natural resistance to certain ways of attempting to construct the self: there are perhaps some (internal and external) materials there—not yet coherent or unified enough to count as a self—that the self is eventually formed out of, and these materials allow for some constructions and block some others. Since not "anything goes" here, some aspects of the process of discovery are preserved in this construction of an authentic self.

Cusk also sees the appeal of the notion of authenticity that demands the discovery of a characterless self at several points in her recent work. For example, she speaks of innocence as a destination and often looks for a kind of objectivity that appears to be possible only for someone without an identity.[19] She nevertheless joins modern thinking in her skepticism about character and the straightforward uncovering of a real self.[20] There is even almost an inversion of the intuitive picture of authenticity in some of her writing. Consider, for example, the following passage from *Coventry*.[21]

> It is as though I was born imprisoned in a block of stone from which it has been both a necessity and an obligation to free myself. The feeling of incarceration in what was pre-existing and inflexible works well enough, I suppose, as a paradigm for the contemporary woman's struggle towards personal liberty. [...] I am not free yet, by any means. It is laborious and slow, chipping away at that block. There would be a temptation to give up, were the feelings of claustrophobia and confinement less intense.[22]

This imagery suggests a characterless *outside* that has been created by the imposition of norms and expectations and from which one must both construct and liberate an inner self by giving this characterless external shape a new form. Again, there is a recognition of the attraction of thinking about authenticity as an act of discovery, but a simultaneous realization that the traditional, simple way of making sense of what such a discovery might come to is not satisfactory.[23]

This traditional way of relating authenticity and self-discovery can be seen clearly in Williams' discussion of Rousseau's *Confessions* in *Truth and Truthfulness*. Once the details of this account are briefly given and the role of the characterless moral self in it has been located, we'll be able to move on to noting the consequences of its rejection in more detail.

3 Rousseau on Self Discovery

Williams' (2002) chapter on Rousseau and Diderot aims to trace part of the history of the invention of authenticity.[24] Rousseau represents the—in some ways—naïve starting point of this ideal, and Diderot subsequently gives us a more sophisticated and realistic alternative.

Rousseau undertakes his confessions with a thought in mind that would've perhaps seemed obvious enough before, say, Nietzsche and Freud: one can come to know oneself completely through honest and careful observation of one's intentions, moods, and actions.[25]

> It is the history of my soul that I have promised to give, and in order to write it faithfully I do not need

tools for the Kantian to respond with. See, e.g., (Kant 1974: A285-287).

[16] (Williams 1993: 94-95)

[17] See (Williams 1993: 158-159).

[18] (Williams 2002: 184)

[19] See (Cusk 2019a: 41) and (Cusk 2014: 43).

[20] See, e.g., (Cusk 2014: 105, 209).

[21] Similar imagery appears in (Cusk 2016: 141).

[22] (Cusk 2019a: 42)

[23] Another interesting aspect of the appeal of the ideal of the characterless moral self in Cusk's work can be connected with her themes of the "virtues of passivity," wanting to vanish, be invisible, not to burden anybody, etc. (Cusk 2014: 170), (Cusk 2018: 117), (Cusk 2021: 5).

[24] (Williams 2002: 172-173)

[25] According to Williams, Rousseau himself eventually comes to believe that the project of self-discovery is not quite so simple near the end of his life. See (Williams 2002: 175-176).

> any other records; it is enough, as I have done up to now, to go back into myself.[26]

Williams takes Rousseau to presuppose that this "going back into himself" will reveal a coherent, steady character, but he shows this picture of the self, and Rousseau's goals in the *Confessions* more generally, to be somewhat unrealistic.

The point of Rousseau's work isn't *merely* to discover himself: by his own accounting, that would only involve the fairly trivial task of looking to see.[27] Rather, his aim is to allow *others* to see and understand him as he really is. And how he really is (unsurprisingly) is fundamentally good. He further appears to suppose that this is roughly how everyone else will turn out to be upon examination as well. If, e.g., I find myself lying to save face or being argumentative and bullying, well, these are sure to be just passing moods and not part of my authentic way of being. And so the work of the autobiographer of the self will generally end up not revealing a unique individual, but rather a self just like any other good person—a characterless moral self.[28] This outcome is congenial to Rousseau's further project of finding a common ground for social and political life since it allows harmonious living to be achieved simply through an ability to be honest with one another: if I can sincerely express my thoughts to you, I must not have anything to hide, so my living can be taken to be in accord with my authentic moral core,[29] and since, as essentially good people, we'll want essentially the same things, political order can be maintained without objectionable coercion.

This line of reasoning is, however, based on assumptions that most would no longer accept: it's now a commonplace that we are not transparent to ourselves in the way Rousseau presupposes; unless we take for granted that a coherent self *must* be what we find when we try to observe our current states, it's not clear why that's what we should expect to find; and, finally, without appeal to the idea of, say, being created with moral impulses, there's no obvious reason to believe that authenticity will reveal selves that are fundamentally conducive to ethical life together. A different understanding of the authentic self and coming to know it, including its political propensities, is needed.

If there is not an authentic self to be found that can be expected to properly ground one's moral point of view, one option for moral philosophy is to do without it and the related concept of moral character. Williams' opinion of this approach can be gleaned from the first epigraph to *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*: *Quand on n'a pas de caractère, il faut bien se donner une méthode.*[30] The context of this quote from Camus's *La Chute* suggests that the kind of person who needs a method is much like the Eichmann whose portrait Hannah Arendt (perhaps implausibly) paints in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Maybe it's a bit of an exaggeration to chastise rule-based systems of morality for lack of attention to character in this strong of a way, but I take it that this is part of what Williams' choice aims to get across.

The other path leads back to our initial questions about how the moral self develops on its own and through our conscious efforts to develop it. At least since Hegel, the prospect of explanatory accounts of what a person's moral point of view will develop into given his or her environment has been reasonably in question.[31] But if an account of *which* moral point of view an agent can be expected to develop isn't in the offing, we still may be able to find a useful account of the mechanisms explaining *how* a moral point of view is reached.[32] Diderot's picture of the self provides one model for how these perspectives are settled on. The technologies of the self that can be found in Cusk's work will be seen to extend and elaborate on this picture.

4 Diderot's Picture of the Self

Williams introduces his Diderot-inspired model of the self by discussing the shortcomings Diderot seems to find with the way Rameau's nephew lives his life in *Rameau's Nephew*. Rameau's nephew, referred to as '*Lui*' in the dialogue, is portrayed as being a "conspicuously not self-deceived" eccentric,[33] who is at least consistent in the Pickwickian sense of the Vicar of Bray.

> This Vicar being taxed by one for being a *Turn-coat*, and an unconstant Changeling, *Not so*, said he, *for I alwaies kept my Principle, which is this, to live and die the Vicar of* Bray.[34]

His great spontaneity, creativity, and amorphousness, however, make it such that, "What he is not is a unity, all of a piece. He is, to a greater extent than [*Moi*, or Diderot], 'disintegrated.'"[35] Williams and Diderot each seem to think that, both for his own sake and for the sake of those around him, *Lui* could stand to have the "swarm of bees" revealed in his self-disclosures steadied into something a bit more constant. It's through this process of steadying, as well as noting the resistances to it, that we can arrive at something like an authentic self according to this view.[36,37]

[26] (Rousseau 1789/2012: 7), cited and translated by Williams at (Williams 2002: 174).

[27] *Cf.* (Williams 2002: 175).

[28] *Cf.* (Williams 2002: 179-180).

[29] (Williams 2002: 179)

[30] "When one has no character one has to have a method."

[31] See, e.g., (Hegel 1807/2018: §§306-307).

[32] See (Dupré 1993: 117-119) for more on the expectations we can have for explanatory theories of capacities *vs*. actual behavior.

[33] (Williams 2002: 189)

[34] (Fuller 1662: 82-83)

[35] (Williams 2002: 189)

[36] (Williams 2002: 190-191)

[37] Diderot's description of *Lui* suggests the notion of *frantumaglia* employed by Elena Ferrante (2016), and her desire to bring order to

It's easiest to further explain Williams' Diderot-inspired picture of the self with an example. Consider the following introduction to Sophie Calle's *Take Care of Yourself* (2007).

> I received an email telling me it was over.
> I didn't know how to respond.
> It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.
> It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."
> And so I did.
> I asked 107 women (including two made from wood and one with feathers), chosen for their professions or skills, to interpret this letter.
> To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.
> Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.
> Answer for me.
> It was a way to taking the time to break up.
> A way of taking care of myself.

Calle was surprised by this breakup message the same day its author published a book dedicated to her, and it clearly left her in a state of confusion and disarray, facing a swarm of emotions (e.g., anger and despair), desires (to understand, to seek help, to hide), and mere wishes (that the letter be a mistake or misaddressed, or to be somebody else entirely). Faced with this disordered state, Calle turns to a group of women who individually compose a kind of collective *Exercices de style* riffing on the letter and helping her come to terms with it and the new facts of her life and self.

Through the process or by its end, Calle might be convinced (or convince herself) that, for example, a mere wish to be somebody else not faced with such a letter and the loss implied was not so impossible after all. In that case, her initial mere wish—"mere," because seemingly unachievable—might have been converted into a stable, achievable desire that might have led her to make a dramatic break with, or forget, her past life and try become somebody new. Alternatively, her commitment to her past existence and desire to bear the pain of this break up more stoically in the face of support or objections from her chorus of helpers might win out and form an enduring element of her set of desires moving forward.[38] In either case, with Calle—as with any of us—there are more and less fixed inclinations, beliefs, motivations, impossibilities, and so on that are solidified or dissolved in a variety of ways through her chosen process and processes like it.[39] In the end, according to the Diderot-inspired view, our selves may be understood to be "what with increasing steadiness [we] can sincerely profess."[40]

this "jumble of fragments" through so-called entrustment also recalls Diderot's aims in steadying. See (Shpall 2021, 2022) for discussion.

[38] These options may be compared with those Williams sees Ajax as potentially choosing between in his discussion of Sophocles' play. See, e.g., (Williams 1993: 73).

[39] Wittgenstein's analogy of the shifting sands of a riverbed is useful here (Wittgenstein 1969: §§66-69). See [reference removed for review] for an interpretation of this metaphor.

[40] (Williams 2002: 204)

This process of self-creation and steadying is difficult of course and is never really complete, but the temporary results provide us with a picture of having achieved an authentic self through a process with constraints that allows it to share important characteristics with ordinary discovery. Note, however, a few aspects of the example that might lead us to ask questions about the model as well as to seek to expand it. First, for all that's been said, the self created through this stabilization process has no guarantee of being specifically moral without some conscious effort being made.[41] Why, for example, shouldn't the process stabilize a fanatical hatred for men in Calle? And what, if anything, in Williams' account allows us to say that something has gone wrong if this were to occur? Second, there is the question of finding the appropriate balance between protecting one's individuality or subjectivity and the external pressures applied by any kind of steadying process. This question doesn't arise explicitly in the Calle example/experiment, but it is one that can be expected to be especially significant for the women involved as well as for members of other marginalized groups. Finally, on Williams' portrayal of it, the Diderot-inspired picture sees the steadying of the self as taking place through a process that is itself fairly steadied. But Calle's process, which aside from its sophistication and scale needn't be different in kind from the sorts of processes anyone else might engage in while constructing their selves, doesn't seem much like a deliberation at all and neither does it appear to seek something like a stable verdict even about the interpretation of the message being so carefully scrutinized.

Each of these calls for elaboration of Williams' Diderot-inspired model of the self is connected with the steadying process that is the "technology" at the center of the account. As mentioned in the Introduction, Williams notes that there are costs that come with this kind of steadying of oneself, but he further suggests that its benefits are so great "to human interaction and a manageable life" that they're worth paying.[42] In the remainder of the paper, by drawing on Cusk's recent work, I'll aim to show instead (1) that Williams' own account would be better off embracing the value of some amount of instability; (2) that there's reason to resolve the "tensions between individuality and the demands of virtue" (2002: 184) a bit more on the side of individuality than Williams appears to propose; and (3) that expanding the model to make room for not-so-deliberative processes of (partial) stabilization makes it more satisfactory and complete.

5 Technologies of the Self in Cusk's Recent Work

I've been suggesting that Williams' Diderot-inspired model of the self is naturally described as being founded on steady-

[41] *Cf.* (Williams 2002: 189-190).

[42] (Williams 2002: 200)

ing or stabilization, which is a "technology of the self" in Foucault's sense in that it

> permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.[43]

While we'll not be getting to immorality here unfortunately, there's plenty of room to expand on the basics of Williams' model in the hopes of effecting some of the changes Foucault enumerates while also enhancing the picture of the self under consideration. The following are a few of the technologies of self frequently discussed in the work of Rachel Cusk that expand on the Diderot-inspired model in this way.

5.1 A Less Stable Mind

Section 4 ended with general questions about the necessity and value of steadiness. This type of question may be especially pressing for women like Cusk aiming to construct moral identities in and outside of their work because many female authors and artists have found a kind of amorphousness to be a central part of their experience of themselves in the world. Consider, e.g., Faye's report on her temporary apartment-mate's experience on an airplane from *Outline*.

> What she realized was that her neighbour, so neat and compact, had probably always been the way he was right now: sitting beside him this distinction had become apparent to her. In her life as a woman, amorphousness – the changing of shapes – had been a physical reality: her husband had been, in a sense, her mirror, but these days she found herself without that reflection.[44,45]

One may suggest, as Williams seems to, that the steadiness he's alluding to is better for us all to achieve to some degree, but it's still worth maintaining skepticism when well-intentioned "people start thinking of health in intellectual activities," even when they're aiming at social goods, before first examining the specifics that might make a particular person's life go badly (or not) without the recommended treatment.[46]

In *Transit*, Faye expands on these worries about a kind of steadiness that can be seen as an easy way out of a moral imperative to achieve self-knowledge.

> [A] lot of people spen[d] their lives trying to make things last as a way of avoiding asking themselves whether those things were what they really wanted.[47]

Cusk presents a number of options for avoiding this avoidance that seem to take as a motto: "Alienation is a path to self-knowledge."[48]

For instance, the artist D in "The Stuntman" begins painting upside down and finds that he's hit upon a way to free himself from the "constraint of reality" while still remaining connected to the world in a way that escaping reality's constraints through pure abstraction would not allow. A female novelist later visiting the artist and seeing his work realizes that she had been dreaming of being able to *write* upside down.[49] In each case, the inversion appears to play the role of "discarding or marginalising" one's internal reality in such a way that the world can be seen afresh.[50] Similarly, the Outline trilogy as a whole enacts a kind of "shallowness from profundity"[51] in the way the narrator goes missing and we're presented with nothing more than mostly-indirect-speech reports of what various people in Faye's life say to her: "What you have is people, strangers in the street, and the only way you can know them is by what they say."[52] By giving her readers only an outside surface, Cusk demands that we grapple with what the speakers are saying or have said alone, without the support and comfort of already knowing who they are and what they're like—details more in-depth descriptions would provide—and without the guidance of an omniscient overseer. These forced unfamiliarities help contribute to conditions where we can attempt something approaching an ethnological study of the people we're hearing from and of our own responses to them partly detached from ordinary encounters and imposed moral norms.[53]

These techniques of self-alienation, while extending the model, make sense as a path towards the creation of an authentic self on Williams' Diderot-inspired view in a way they could not in the Rousseau picture. And they each suggest ways of not allowing the steadying process of the Diderot model to go too far to the point of stifling the achievement of meaningful self-knowledge through the creation of an already- and easily-known garden-variety self instead.

It's natural to worry that projects of self-construction of this sort and the connected rejection of steadying are somehow self-indulgent and only available to a minority with the time and means to undertake them. Further, as Williams

[43] (Foucault 1988: 18)

[44] (Cusk 2014: 240)

[45] See similar sentiments in (Ernaux 2016: 26): "no defined self, but 'selves'." Rosi Braidotti also cites Laurie Anderson, "moods are far more important than modes of being," and Virginia Woolf from *The Waves*, "I am rooted but I flow," (Braidotti 2002: 2, 1) in the same vein.

[46] *Cf.* (Martin 1988: 13).

[47] (Cusk 2016: 165)

[48] This phrase is from (Geuss 2017: 111).

[49] (Cusk 2023: 53)

[50] See (Cusk 2021: 96-97). This marginalized perspective is partly why the women in "The Stuntman" feel as if D has appropriated something from them with his new style of painting.

[51] (Nietzsche 1882/2001: §4)

[52] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/rachel-cusk-interview-aftermath-outline (Accessed 14 July 2023)

[53] *Cf.* (Ernaux 1998: 33).

himself rightly notes, the search for authentic life can even be dangerous at times.[54] Nevertheless, it seems as if these goals really are worthy of striving to achieve.

First, many have had the thought that individuality and spontaneity are somehow under threat in the modern world. For example, members of the Frankfurt School saw in the steadying of the self the creation of the abstract, universal legal subject that is the "dark secret of bourgeois society" and the foundation of its coercive character of conformity to law and instrumental rationality.[55,56] Whether or not one agrees with this diagnosis, it's one that should have some force for Williams because it appears to locate a return of the characterless moral self in the development of the Diderot-inspired picture in an especially insidious form because, if rechosen, it will have been self-selected to some degree. In the face of worries of this sort, it may make sense for us to take it as imperative to strive to "become 'fabulous opera[s]' and not the arena of the known."[57]

Second, recall the question from Section 4 asking how Williams' account might respond to a self steadied into, say, a fanatical hatred of men. Given his commitment to there being "no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities,"[58] the option of suggesting that a moral self must combine stability with the exemplification of some number of other objectively identifiable values won't be a likely means of response. Further, the rejection of the characterless moral self also precludes a response that relies on some inherently good inner core to humanity that would prevent such a steady state from being realized and deemed valuable. If, by assumption, pure reason alone can't decide the goodness or badness of a chosen self and there really is something wrong with certain forms of self-constitution, then it looks as if Williams must commit to this badness being experienceable "from the inside," so to speak.[59] If one's self is for all intents and purposes fully unified and stable, there may be no room for alternative points of view that could lend real force to the problematic aspects of a form of life to find a foothold. On the other hand, some amount of fragmentation and instability may permit the existence of just this space and the possibility of finding the internal reasons for rejecting an ultimately negative form of steadiness. All of this is to say that noting the value of the kind of self-alienation and self-distancing discussed in Cusk's work may offer Williams the best means available to him of avoiding the problem of countenancing the stabilization of "bad" selves.

[54] (Williams 2002: 205)

[55] See (Adorno 1959/2001: 55), (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947/2002: 23). *Cf.* (Thornhill 2005: 122-123).

[56] See (Deleuze and Guattari 1972/2009: 1.6) for other worries about fixing one's identity in this way.

[57] (Cixous 1974: 387)

[58] (Williams 1993: 166)

[59] *Cf.* (Williams 1980).

There may be a worry here that in the process of aiming to prevent the stabilization of selves that are somehow undesirable, we simultaneously prevent the possibility of stabilizing the forms of life and selfhood that are in themselves of great value. This worry is based, however, on an assumption that a valuable form of selfhood could fail to be unstable or "self-overcoming" to some degree. Many, including Cusk, reasonably think otherwise.[60]

> I had a terror of my own, which was the fear of knowing something in its entirety. To seek held no particular fear for me: it was to find, and to know, and to come to the end of knowing that I shrunk from.[61]

In fact, the more significant danger in the kind of self-alienation practiced by the figures in Cusk's work may be the implied threat to the ability to commit fully to their projects and to find meaning in the selves they've so far constituted. The new ways of seeing and listening that (temporarily) alienate us from ourselves in order to prevent the steadiness that can "kill what is essential in us"[62] can *both* help us break out of the confines of the narratives that Cusk repeatedly notes keep us from realizing our freer, more authentic selves, *and* have the capacity to kill our desire to care. In the next section, I'll consider some of the ways Cusk's work touches on this range of issues related to stories, narrative, and the creation of meaning in order to address this potential problem. This consideration will also bring us back to the non-deliberative aspects of the Calle example noted as not finding a natural place in Williams' Diderot-inspired picture of the self in Section 4.

5.2 Visual Arts vs. Narrative Structure

Narrative accounts of personal identity are now familiar and can be seen as providing both an explanation of what makes one who one is as well as a way of finding meaning and value in one's life.[63] Given the prospects of losing the connection with one's engagements faced by a more fragmented or unstable version of the self, it might be expected that Cusk would naturally gravitate towards such a picture of personal identity. Just the opposite seems to be the case, however. The "stories" that the speakers are creating or finding to have lost meaning, along with their desires to get outside of these sto-

[60] See, e.g., (Nietzsche 1883/2006: 88-90) and (Pippin 2010: Ch. 6). See also (Lear 2011: 65) for related thoughts.

[61] (Cusk 2009: 8)

[62] (Cusk 2021: 3)

[63] See, e.g., (MacIntyre 1981: 219) and (Ricoeur 1992: 140-148). Ricouer's distinction between *idem*- and *ipse*-identity (1992: 1-3) may be useful in further elaborations of some of the ideas under discussion in this essay, but because his view is so closely tied to narrative accounts of identity, which Cusk steers us away from, I've not explored the possibility here.

ries are common themes in her recent work. The following passage is representative.

> She believed in all of it, at the time, believed passionately in the Barbie doll and the violin and the Nintendo that everyone had to have one year – and once the belief had worn off, these things were thrown away. But what, had she not believed in them, might she have seen instead? In the suspension of her belief, what did she miss?[64]

Cusk is part of a growing group of thinkers who might be called "narrative skeptics": those who don't want to do away with the narrative telling of the self *per se*, but who find it all too easy to fit oneself into prepackaged narratives or who otherwise find concealed dangers in the form. In a world where everyone, every product, every corporation even has a story to tell, it's natural enough to feel as if new forms of expression are needed.[65] One of the speakers in *Outline* expresses the basic sentiment: "this sense of life as a progression is something I want no more of."[66]

This rejection of narrative structure as the primary source of unity and meaning in a life isn't motivated by a simple tiring of old forms. If the Calle example can be taken as at all representative—and I've suggested that it can be—then the ways we make sense of our lives and find meaning in them must be seen as being more complex than the Diderot-inspired model recognizes by only involving more straightforward reasoned discussion settling on propositional contents: our constructions of meaning and reasons to care are not obviously settled on deliberatively, aren't necessarily aiming for a unitary narrative overview, and don't clearly lead to consistent, steady states. Without the assumption of a true self awaiting discovery, none of these facts should be all that surprising. If one thinks of the construction of the self as a project of creation (at times resembling discovery in various ways), there doesn't seem to be any strong reason to say that this project must be given an overarching shape and sense through the adoption of a narrative form.[67] The absence of a separable self with transparent intentions existing prior to action further places the sense that can be given to a person's daily strivings and life projects into the arena of interpretation, where questions about what the pieces of one's life mean and how they might be seen to be valuable can only be determined using tools similar to those employed in coming to an understanding of a text or work of art.[68] In her recent thinking about how creating and writing relate to our self-construction, Cusk seems to have increasingly turned to the visual arts as providing the necessary, more modern tools. What are the supposed advantages of this form of expression and its related interpretive technologies?

At first glance, it may seem like there couldn't be many. Especially for women, the available models of what autonomy, subjectivity, and artistic achievement look like often may seem altogether foreign, so it's not immediately evident how the visual arts could allow escape from the difficulty of authentic self-expression and interpretation any more than self-narrative or writing autofiction could.[69] But Cusk wants to note that not all forms of self-expression are equally "colonized." The medium of language is one thing, but the visual world, she suggests is different.

> It doesn't legislate for lived life in the way that language does. It's not the currency of lived life. An image doesn't have to be recognizable in the way that a sentence does.[70]

Not only does the abandonment of narrative form in self-understanding and self-construction free one from the need to make one's life understandable to others, from the pressure for it to come to a satisfying close, and so on,[71] Cusk's idea seems to be, further, that the sentences we naturally reach for themselves are, without reconstruction, already imprisoning.[72] The building blocks of visual arts, e.g., Klee's "line on a walk,"[73] if they could be imported somehow into the project of writing and self-creation,[74] may reasonably be thought to have accumulated less baggage, and so may again offer an opportunity for new forms of self-expression and ways of finding value in the possibly fragmentary pieces of one's life.[75] When the ability to find this kind of meaning is at risk, the more ways one has for reestablishing it, the better.

Williams' initial Diderot-inspired model of the self trades only in propositional contents or contents on their way to becoming propositional. But as self-construction and interpretation moves away from narrative forms, it may become clearer that one needn't only have such contents become fixed and guiding, and not only through conversation with oneself and others that justifies or raises doubts about propositions. I may, that is, become what with increasing steadiness I can sincerely admire or find deeply meaningful or somehow simply "right." For example, in his lectures on

[64] (Cusk 2019a: 29). *Cf.* the question early in (Cusk 2021: 8), "Why do we live so painfully in our fictions?"

[65] *Cf.* (Brooks 2022: Ch. 1). See also Sehgal (2023).

[66] (Cusk 2014: 99)

[67] Williams is less of a narrative skeptic than Cusk though. See, e.g., (Williams 2002: Ch. 10.1).

[68] *Cf.* (Pippin 2010: Ch.4).

[69] *Cf.* (Shpall 2021: 683-684).

[70] (Heti 2020)

[71] *Cf.* (Sehgal 2023: 70).

[72] And it's not just sentences that must be overcome if Hindemith is right: "The initiated know that most of the music that is produced every day represents [...] above all the obstinacy of the tones themselves. Our principal task is to overcome the latter" (1942: 12).

[73] (Klee 1925: 6)

[74] E.g., perhaps through the experiments in "ekphrastic" writing discussed in Dutton (2022).

[75] The further thought expressed by Marcuse with the phrase, "Unclarity is a virtue," is relevant here. See (Geuss 2022: 154-157).

irony, Jonathan Lear describes a number of the habits, goals, and associations of a patient, "Ms. A," and suggests that it's "plausible that certain images of *boyishness* are providing *a* source of unity to [her] life."[76] Cusk's "I Am Nothing, I Am Everything" similarly illustrates her complicated relationship with her Catholic upbringing when it ends with an image of a First Communion statue, which she received as a child and later put into her children's bedroom, broken and in a shoebox hidden in the back of a cupboard (after she's knocked it over).[77] Maybe the images of "boyishness" or the broken statue and the way each provides meaning to a certain portion of a life could be translated into a collection of propositional contents, but we oughtn't be motivated to attempt to do so just in order to fit them into a theoretical model.

Steadying aspects of the self and imbuing one's dealings with meaning in these ways and by these means may additionally be especially attractive to those who don't find the model of steadying oneself in concert with others in the form of a long argumentative engagement all that appealing. At various points in the Outline trilogy, e.g., Faye rather sanely suggests that she doesn't want to convince anyone of anything.[78] It may be wise to follow her in that resistance.

All of this is highly speculative of course. But part of the point of the suggested shift in interpretive and creative forms is to open up space for additional styles of authenticity and self-exploration in unpredictable ways that aren't fully understood and worked over already. If I'm trying, say, to "write upside down" and no one (yet) has a clear idea about what exactly that means, whatever I come up with has to have come from me and be revelatory of myself in some sense. Whether there is any thing ultimately valuable in my productions is another question. But, then again, here the process and hope of success itself may contribute the kind of meaning Cusk suggests can go missing when narratives fail.

At the end of Section 4, I suggested that attention to Cusk's recent work could enhance Williams' Diderot-inspired model of the self by leading us (1) to emphasize the value of instability; (2) to rebalance the scales in favor of individuality when this value comes up against the demands of society; and (3) to incorporate into the model less deliberation-like forms of sense- and meaning-making that may settle on non-propositional contents. So far, each of these has been touched on at least briefly. In the final subsection, I'll expand on (2) by discussing how Cusk's internalized other, "the stuntman," can suggest ways of negotiating the self/other divide while constructing an authentic self by helping us to avoid some subtle ways of supporting inauthenticity or even injustice.

5.3 A New Role for an Internalized Other

In the last section, I suggested (roughly) that what we say yes to can shape us and show us who we are. Williams is well-known for arguing that what we feel shame about can also play this kind of role.[79] Who we are and what we value is further revealed by what we reject—by our "canons of prohibitions."[80] What we reject can, however, survive "as something that is avoided, the way consonance survives in atonal harmony."[81] In Cusk's most recent short story, "The Stuntman," one of the principal characters finds herself confronted with an internalized figure that is something like the lingering embodiment of the aspects of the female experience she wishes to disavow.[82] Here is how she introduces it, just after the narrator of this part of the story has been assaulted by a woman in the street and she's been left on her hands and knees in the midst of a "death-in-life" experience, wondering whether she's dead or live.

> I had generally attributed those female experiences to an alternate or double self whose role it was to absorb and confine them so that they played no part in the ongoing story of life. Like a kind of stuntman, this alternate self took the actual risks in the creation of a fictional being whose exposure to danger was supposedly fundamental to its identity.[83]

This technology of the self will be seen to be unlike the others I've noted so far in being less freely chosen and more imposed from without, but it nevertheless has revelatory potential similar to the way shame—a likewise unasked for phenomenon—helps one realize one's authentic self and ethical commitments on Williams' view.[84]

Cusk's idea seems to be—here and in the rest of the story—that by having the various demands on female existence she notes coalesce into this single concrete and internalized figure, it becomes possible to see clearly their potential for violence to the self and, through this realization, attempt to break free from them. Or, as Cusk puts it, to enact "the defeat of representation by violence."[85] The character of the painter, L, in *Second Place* plays something like

[76] (Lear 2011: 47-50, emphasis in the original). Compare with (Moran 2011: 114).

[77] See (Cusk 2019c: 161-162). The discussion of Norman Lewis's "Cathedral" in Cusk (2023) and its "summoning of obscurity" is another example worth considering here.

[78] See, e.g., (Cusk 2014: 19), (Cusk 2016: 7).

[79] See, e.g., (Williams 1993: 94).

[80] (Adorno 1970/1997: 36)

[81] (Adorno 1991: 248)

[82] An internalized other also plays a major role in Williams' account of shame (1993: 219-223). The figure I'm considering in this section isn't meant to be identical to Williams' but they could be considered to be overlapping. The role this figure might be made to play is more important than its strict identity for present purposes.

[83] (Cusk 2023: 55)

[84] (Williams 1993: 93-94)

[85] (Cusk 2023: 55)

this role as well. He's portrayed as the kind of person who "couldn't conceive of the notion of obligation," and the narrator asks upon realizing this,

> Do such people have, in fact, a higher moral function, which is to show us what our own assumptions and beliefs are made of?[86]

Again, the striking presence of a certain alternative way of being appears to contain within it the potential for motivating a reconstruction of oneself and along with one's moral presuppositions and point of view.

It's important that this figure is seen as being a separate internalized entity for at least the following reasons. First, its being internalized forces a reckoning with the potentially inauthentic aspects of one's existence it represents. As Cusk puts it, "She was my dark twin, an inextinguishable reminder of something in myself that had been denied existence."[87] Second, the internalization helps avoid the problems that can come along with so-called defensive othering that could easily arise here otherwise. It's a familiar idea that people trying to define themselves often do so by saying, e.g., "Sure, those others who appear to be like me are like that, but I'm not."[88] This form of self-definition, however, is problematic because it can reinforce the stereotypes or systems of injustice the speakers are trying to break themselves out of.[89] All this being the case explains why it's important that Cusk's narrator's representation of what she aims to reject is an internal figure. The internalization gives her striving for self-realization and authenticity a better chance to avoid this kind of negative impact on really existing others.

That Cusk might have something like this interpretation of the stuntman in mind is born out by some key occurrences in the story. At one point, Cusk's narrator identifies her attacker with the stuntman in an externalized form. It's in this form that the figure experiences the anger that leads her to carry out the attack on the narrator. And in this externalized form, the stuntman may have a right to be angry, as Cusk appears to suggest.[90] If the rejection of what the stuntman represents to the narrator were in fact a rejection of the way of life of another real person, the narrator's attempt to construct an authentic existence by saying no to such a form of existence could be seen as continuing to support the norms that foster inauthenticity and oppression for that other person in the way the defensive othering literature suggests. The stuntman's reacting in a violent way to this sort of defensive othering can then be read as a way of shocking the narrator out of this way of searching for authenticity and potentially creating a space for free self-development without having to place this kind of unintended burden on others. The attack seen in such a light may be taken, therefore, to enact another defeat of a certain kind of representation by violence. Since attending to the role this relationship to an internalized other can play may drive us towards a form of authenticity that looks for more than simply saying, "I'm *not* like this or like that," we can see this aspect of Cusk's work as offering a further supplementation to the basic Williams/Diderot picture of authentic selfhood.

None of this is to say that we should aim to have these oppressive others internally imposed on us or others, or that those who have had them imposed should be grateful of that fact. But if it is a kind of achievement to have potential desires, beliefs, and aims condensed into one unified voice,[91] then looking for ways of turning this achievement to one's actual advantage—into a technology of the self—seems to be the best way to react to these realities.

Finally, it's worth noting that this attempted rejection of the unequal and taxing demands of femininity needn't be seen as a return to the search for a characterless moral self that we began by rejecting. It's better to see it as giving additional content to the experience of feeling that one's true self must be discovered behind something coming from the outside, especially for those who feel as if so much is required of and imposed on them that was not of their own choosing. Through the Diderot-inspired model of the self and its expansion and enhancement with the technologies of the self derived from Cusk's work, we may have a better chance of achieving this kind of self-understanding without falling back into illusion.

6 Conclusion

In my view, Williams' most welcome contribution to analytic philosophy may be his exemplary practice of reflecting on real literature and cultural artifacts instead of the artificial cases (i.e., "bad literature") philosophers often "lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature."[92] I've tried to reflect here on the interesting recent works of Rachel Cusk in this general spirit. In the space available, I've only been able to scratch the surface of these texts and have had to leave mostly unmentioned many concerns fundamental to her thinking, in particular those specially focused on femininity and the female body. I hope that future explorations of her writings will be able to go farther.

[86] (Cusk 2021: 105)

[87] (Cusk 2023: 61)

[88] See (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 425-426), where the authors discuss homeless men calling other homeless men "lazy bums" and a few other examples of the practice.

[89] The difficulty of avoiding this kind of imposition is one manifestation of the tensions between what we owe to ourselves and what we owe to others mentioned at the end of Section 4.

[90] See (Cusk 2023: 59-60), where the narrator suggests that most of her felt as if the attack was deserved.

[91] *Cf.* (Williams 2002: 195). See, however, (Beauvoir 1949/2011: Introduction) for questions about how consistent this voice can be.

[92] (Williams 1993: 13)

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