

27. Sincerity After Authenticity: Ethical Life Under Conditions of Fictional Reality

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Abstract: The ethical ideal of authenticity has long been understood as fidelity to an inner identity that precedes and grounds its expression. This paper argues that authenticity no longer works as a reliable ethical guide in a world shaped by performance, media saturation, and blurred lines between reality and simulation. Drawing on Judith Butler's critique of the metaphysics of substance, Jean Baudrillard's account of hyperreality, and Saul Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility, I argue that even if a "true self" exists at some metaphysical level, it cannot serve as a practical or accessible foundation for ethical life. Authenticity thus persists as a metaphysical fiction—conceptually intelligible but normatively inoperative. In its place, this paper develops sincerity as an alternative ethical framework. Through the Spectrum of Sincerity—defined by coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumentality—it establishes sincerity as the ethical virtue appropriate to fictional reality.

Keywords: Authenticity; Sincerity; Fictional Reality; Ethical Identity; Performativity; Hyperreality; Normative Ethics; Spectrum of Sincerity

1. Introduction

Authenticity has become one of the defining ethical ideals of modernity.¹ To live authentically is widely taken to mean that one's actions, expressions, and commitments genuinely reflect who one "really is." Across philosophical, political, and cultural discourse, authenticity operates as a guiding norm: we are told to discover our true identities, resist pressures that distort them, and bring our outward lives into alignment with our inner sense of self. Yet this ideal depends on a particular metaphysical picture of the self, one in which identity exists as a stable inner

¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 15.

core capable of grounding action. In other words, the moral force of authenticity depends on a coherent and meaningful distinction between inner identity and outward appearance.

This paper argues that this distinction can no longer ground ethical life. Consequently, authenticity should not be treated as an achievable moral ideal but as a metaphysical fiction. Authenticity depends on the assumption that we have access to a stable ontological core, an assumption that cannot bear the normative weight placed on it. Importantly, this diagnosis does not require denying the metaphysical possibility of identity. By drawing on Saul Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility,² I argue that even if determinate metaphysical facts about identity obtain, they cannot function as actionable grounds for normative orientation.

Normative guidance depends not merely on what may be metaphysically true, but on what is epistemically accessible as a basis for action. Ethical life necessarily unfolds under conditions in which identity is available only through its enacted forms. This distinction has become increasingly difficult to sustain in a world shaped by mediated selfhood. Digital self-presentation, proliferating social roles, and technologically structured identities all destabilize the idea of a single, stable self that exists prior to its expression. Individuals now move across multiple, partially overlapping performances of selfhood in different social contexts.³ Professional identities, online personae, and interpersonal roles do not simply express a unified core; they help constitute what the self becomes. In such conditions, the injunction to "be authentic" begins to lose its clarity. The difficulty is not that authenticity is hard to achieve, but that the metaphysical assumptions it relies on no longer provide a basis for ethical orientation.

Philosophical work in the late twentieth century brings this instability to the fore. Judith Butler's critique of the metaphysics of substance undermines the assumption that identity expresses a pregiven interior essence, arguing instead that the subject emerges through performative repetition.⁴ Jean Baudrillard's account of simulacra further destabilizes the distinction between appearance and reality, suggesting that contem-

² Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980), 38.

³ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Anchor Books, 1959), 22.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 25.

porary social life unfolds under conditions of hyperreality, in which signs no longer refer to an underlying original.⁵ In what Baudrillard describes as conditions of hyperreality, contemporary social life increasingly takes on the structure of what I will call fictional reality: a condition in which identity no longer refers to an epistemically accessible ground. Taken together, these analyses dissolve the ontological structure on which authenticity depends. If identity is constituted through performance, and if performance no longer refers to an independent ground, then the ideal of aligning expression with essence loses its object.

The collapse of authenticity's metaphysical foundation does not dissolve the ethical problem it was meant to solve. We remain accountable for our actions, commitments, and ways of presenting ourselves, even if there is no stable inner essence to anchor them. The question, then, is not whether ethical selfhood is still possible, but how ethical judgment must be rethought once metaphysical identity can no longer serve as a knowable foundation for action.

The constructive claim of this paper is that sincerity, not authenticity, provides the ethical framework appropriate to such conditions. Unlike authenticity, sincerity does not depend upon access to an inner essence. It evaluates selves at the level of their enacted commitments: their coherence across contexts, their aspirational orientation toward normative ideals, and their resistance to purely instrumental optimization. Sincerity, in this sense, consists in the responsible inhabitation of one's enacted commitments, rather than their correspondence to a metaphysically prior identity. Under conditions of fictional reality, sincerity emerges as the ethical virtue appropriate to normative life when identity is no longer available.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The first section examines the historical emergence of authenticity as a moral ideal, drawing on Lionel Trilling and Charles Taylor to clarify its metaphysical presuppositions. The second analyzes how Butler's theory of performativity and Baudrillard's account of simulation destabilize the distinction between inner identity and outward expression. The third reframes the problem using Saul Kripke's modal distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility and addresses a central objection defending authenticity as a regulative ideal. The fourth develops the constructive alternative,

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

introducing the Spectrum of Sincerity as a framework for normative evaluation under conditions of fictional reality. By replacing authenticity with sincerity as the central ethical virtue, this paper does not abandon the modern concern with selfhood and responsibility. Instead, it relocates ethical life within the only domain in which it can operate: the enacted, mediated, and epistemically constrained conditions under which contemporary selves are constituted.

2. Authenticity and the Metaphysics of Inner Truth

The rise of authenticity as a moral ideal is perhaps most clearly articulated in Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, where he traces a shift in how selfhood is morally understood. Trilling distinguishes authenticity from the older ideal of sincerity, which structured moral life before the modern turn inward. In its classical sense, sincerity required alignment between avowal and belief: to be sincere was to mean what one said and to say what one meant.⁶ Its ethical force operated within a shared social world organized around recognizable roles and conventions. It did not require access to a hidden metaphysical essence, but only fidelity to one's declared commitments within established practices of communication.

Authenticity, by contrast, introduces a deeper and more demanding standard. It requires not merely that a person's words reflect their beliefs, but that their entire mode of life express an identity understood to exist independently of its social articulation. Where sincerity regulates the relation between people, authenticity regulates the relation of the self to itself. It presupposes a layered view of the self, in which outward appearances can misrepresent a deeper interior reality. Ethical life becomes not just a matter of consistency in public conduct, but of fidelity to an inward ground that may conflict with socially recognizable roles.⁷

This shift reflects a broader change in how moral authority is understood in modernity. Beginning with Rousseau's critique of social artifice, moral worth increasingly became tied to inwardness rather than conformity. When Rousseau writes that social man "knows how to live only in the opinion of others," he draws a sharp line between the socially

⁶ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

visible self and the self taken to possess moral authority.⁸ Although Rousseau does not use the term “authenticity” in its modern sense, he lays the groundwork for it. He advances the idea that moral authority rests not in publicly defined roles, but in fidelity to an identity taken to exist prior to, and independent of, social expression.

Twentieth-century philosophy pushes this line of thought further. Existentialists such as Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre treat authenticity as central to ethical life. For Heidegger, authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) consists in taking responsibility for one’s own existence and owning the possibilities that arise from it, not retreating into socially prescribed identities.⁹ For Sartre, authenticity demands acknowledging one’s radical freedom rather than living in what he calls “bad faith.” Bad faith is the refusal to accept responsibility for one’s existence, the attempt to hide behind fixed roles or socially defined identities.¹⁰ Despite their differences, these accounts rest on a shared assumption: ethical life turns on how one relates to one’s own existence, whether by taking responsibility for it or evading it. Authenticity becomes the name for living in light of that condition instead of conforming unreflectively to externally imposed definitions.

Taylor’s defense of authenticity represents a more recent attempt to preserve this ideal against charges of narcissism and relativism. He argues that authenticity is not a license for arbitrary self-invention but a demand to articulate and remain faithful to one’s moral orientation within a horizon of shared significance.¹¹ For him, authenticity remains ethically serious because it binds individuals to sources of meaning that transcend mere preference. Yet Taylor’s reconstruction, while protecting authenticity from trivialization, leaves its basic metaphysical picture intact. Even in its dialogical form, authenticity assumes that identity is something to which one can be faithful, rather than something brought into being through the very act of articulating it.

This shared commitment reveals the metaphysical structure that

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Hackett, 1987), 81.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 1996), 357.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 82.

¹¹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 37.

unites otherwise divergent accounts of authenticity. Authenticity presupposes that identity exists as a relatively stable ground that precedes and legitimates its expression. Ethical failure, within this framework, occurs when conduct fails to reflect this ground. The moral task becomes one of alignment: bringing one's enacted life into correspondence with an identity understood as ontologically prior to its articulation.

The difficulty is not merely that such alignment is difficult to achieve, but that its intelligibility depends upon conditions that cannot be secured. Authenticity assumes that identity is stable enough to serve as a point of moral reference and accessible enough to guide action. It depends on a meaningful distinction between who one is and how one appears. If that distinction collapses, authenticity can no longer function as an ethical ideal.

Trilling himself recognizes the instability of this ideal. His genealogy suggests that authenticity emerges at the moment when sincerity becomes insufficient to secure moral trust—when social roles and conventions no longer guarantee the moral credibility of one's avowals.¹² As inherited social frameworks lose their taken-for-granted authority under conditions of modern individualism, moral legitimacy shifts inward. Yet this shift introduces a new form of uncertainty. If identity is understood as interior and potentially opaque even to the subject, then authenticity becomes an aspiration without clear criteria.

Contemporary conditions deepen this instability. Mediated identities, digital self-presentation, and socially distributed forms of subjectivity make it harder to believe that there is a single, stable self to which one could remain faithful. The ethical demand for authenticity persists, but the assumptions that support it grow increasingly fragile. Authenticity begins to function less as a workable ethical norm and more as a metaphysical fiction—a concept that shapes moral aspiration without offering anything clearly accessible to anchor it.

Recognizing this clarifies the stakes of the present inquiry. If authenticity depends upon a metaphysical distinction between identity and its expression, then any philosophical account that destabilizes this distinction will necessarily undermine authenticity's authority as a normative ideal.

¹² Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 5.

3. Performativity and Hyperreality

Two influential strands of late twentieth-century philosophy provide precisely such destabilization. Judith Butler's theory of performativity undermines the assumption that identity precedes its enactment, while Jean Baudrillard's analysis of hyperreality dissolves the conditions under which enactment could be contrasted with an independent reality. Taken together, their arguments do not merely challenge authenticity; they dismantle the ontological and epistemic structure on which it depends.

Judith Butler's critique begins with what she calls the "metaphysics of substance": the humanist assumption that the subject exists as a stable entity that possesses attributes—gender, identity, character—rather than being constituted through them.¹³ Against this view, Butler argues that identity is not the outward manifestation of an inner essence but the effect of historically and socially regulated practices. Gender, in her canonical formulation, "proves to be performative"—not because it is freely chosen or theatrically staged, but because it is brought into being through repeated acts that cite and reenact normative structures.¹⁴

This performative account has implications that extend beyond gender. Butler explicitly rejects the idea that there must be a pre-existing subject who performs identity.¹⁵ The subject does not precede its enactment; it emerges through it. What appears as an inner ground of identity is, on this view, a retroactive stabilization—a conceptual effect produced to render patterns of repetition intelligible. The distinction between identity and its expression, far from grounding ethical evaluation, is itself an effect of normative practices that demand coherence.

For the ethics of authenticity, this poses a decisive challenge. If identity does not exist prior to its enactment, then there is no independent ground against which enactment can be evaluated for its fidelity. The demand to "be true to oneself" presupposes precisely the structure Butler calls into question. Butler's argument does not deny subjectivity or agency; it shifts how we understand them. Agency is not something that exists prior to social practice; it emerges within historically situated forms of life. On this view, the self is not a pre-existing substance expressed through performance, but something that takes shape through it.

¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Authenticity's expressive model fails, then, not because it aims at the wrong ideal, but because it depends on a picture of identity that no longer holds.

If Butler unsettles the priority of identity over performance, Baudrillard pushes the problem further. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he argues that contemporary social life is no longer organized around the opposition between representation and the real.¹⁶ Under conditions of hyperreality, signs no longer refer to an independent reality; they refer only to other signs. Simulation does not distort the real—it precedes and structures what counts as real. The distinction between original and copy, depth and surface, thus ceases to function as a meaningful ontological hierarchy.

Baudrillard's analysis extends beyond media and representation. In a hyperreal environment, identities, roles, and values circulate as self-referential structures. Appeals to authenticity proliferate precisely at the moment when the idea of an independent ground has become unstable. The demand to "be authentic" becomes itself a simulation: a performance that presupposes the existence of a ground it cannot access. Authenticity persists not because it corresponds to an ontological reality, but because it functions as a stabilizing narrative within a system of mediated identities.

Crucially, Baudrillard is not merely saying that reality has disappeared. His stronger claim is that the distinction between reality and simulation no longer functions as a meaningful way of knowing.¹⁷ There is no standpoint outside mediation from which the authenticity of identity could be independently verified. Attempts to recover a "real self" under these conditions do not escape simulation; they reproduce its logic by positing an inaccessible ground whose existence cannot be independently established.

Taken together, Butler and Baudrillard dismantle the two conditions required for authenticity's intelligibility. Butler shows that identity does not exist as a metaphysical ground prior to its enactment. Baudrillard shows that enactment does not occur against the backdrop of an independently accessible reality. Authenticity depends upon both assumptions simultaneously. Once they are withdrawn, authenticity becomes not merely difficult to realize, but conceptually incoherent as a normative ideal.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

What follows from this collapse is not the disappearance of ethical evaluation, but the need to clarify the relationship between metaphysical identity and its epistemic availability. Even if identity persists in a metaphysical sense, ethical life unfolds under conditions in which it is accessible only through its enactment. To clarify this distinction, the next section turns to Saul Kripke's analysis of the relationship between metaphysical reality and epistemic accessibility.

4. Metaphysical Fiction and Epistemic Constraint

If authenticity fails because the metaphysical self it assumes cannot function as a knowable foundation, one might ask whether this means abandoning the idea of selfhood altogether. Two responses follow: either the self is an illusion, or ethical evaluation must proceed without reference to identity. This paper rejects both. The failure of authenticity does not mean that identity disappears; it reveals a confusion about the relationship between metaphysical identity and our access to it.

Saul Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility helps clarify that relationship. Properly understood, it explains why authenticity remains morally compelling even as it proves untenable as a stable normative framework. In *Naming and Necessity*, he argues that metaphysical necessity must be distinguished from epistemic accessibility. Metaphysical necessity concerns what could not have been otherwise, independently of our knowledge of it. By contrast, epistemic possibility concerns what remains open given the limits of our knowledge and description.¹⁸

The two do not coincide. Some truths are necessary even though we cannot recognize them as such, while others appear contingent from our perspective despite being metaphysically fixed. Identity, in particular, does not depend on our ability to specify the criteria that secure it. We can refer to an individual across possible worlds even when we lack epistemic access to the structures that secure their identity.¹⁹

This distinction has implications beyond the philosophy of language. Authenticity assumes that identity is both metaphysically real and epistemically accessible—that it exists independently of its enactment and can, at least in principle, be discovered and followed. The de-

¹⁸ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 38.

¹⁹ Ibid.

mand to “be oneself” rests on the idea that identity is available as a point of moral reference. Kripke’s framework unsettles this assumption. Metaphysical identity does not guarantee epistemic access. Even if identity persists as a metaphysical fact, it does not follow that it can guide action.

Under conditions of performativity and hyperreality, this epistemic limitation becomes decisive. Identity, if it exists metaphysically, is accessible only through its enactment. There is no independent standpoint from which competing enactments could be adjudicated for their fidelity to an underlying ground. The persistence of authenticity discourse thus rests on what may be called a metaphysical fiction: the conflation of metaphysical possibility with epistemic accessibility. Authenticity presupposes that metaphysical identity is available as an ethical standard, when in fact it is not. Its failure lies not in the nonexistence of identity, but in its inaccessibility as a normative ground.

This reframing also clarifies how the present argument relates to constructivist critiques like Judith Butler’s. Butler does not deny subjectivity; she rejects the idea that it exists as a pre-given foundation independent of its enactment. Her critique weakens the claim that identity can serve as a moral reference point by showing that identity takes shape through performative practices rather than existing prior to them. Read through a Kripkean lens, Butler’s performative subject is best understood as epistemically primary: identity becomes accessible only through its enactment, not in advance of it.

This interpretation does not attribute to Butler a commitment to metaphysical realism about identity, nor does the present argument depend upon affirming or denying such realism. Its claim is instead epistemic and ethical: whatever metaphysical facts may obtain about identity, they cannot function as actionable grounds for normative orientation. Butler’s performative account suffices to establish this conclusion by showing that identity becomes available only through its enactment. Kripke’s modal distinction clarifies the implications of this epistemic limitation without presupposing any substantive metaphysical theory of

the self.²⁰ Authenticity fails, therefore, because it presupposes that metaphysical identity is epistemically accessible as a guide to action, when in fact ethical orientation is possible only through the enacted forms in which identity becomes intelligible.

At this point, a defender of authenticity might object that ethical ideals need not depend upon epistemic certainty. Authenticity could function as a regulative ideal—a commitment to fidelity to oneself—even if the self remains partially inaccessible. On this view, the ethical force of authenticity lies not in providing a fully determinate standard, but in orienting agents toward self-integrity under conditions of uncertainty.

This objection correctly recognizes that ethical orientation often operates under conditions of incomplete knowledge. However, it fails to preserve authenticity as a viable ethical framework. For an ethical ideal to guide action, it must operate within the domain of epistemic accessibility. It must provide standards that agents can meaningfully apply. Authenticity, understood as fidelity to an inaccessible metaphysical identity, cannot fulfill this role. It demands alignment with a ground whose content cannot be specified independently of the enactments it is meant to evaluate. Appeals to authenticity inevitably rely upon enacted commitments, practices, and interpretations to determine what counts as fidelity to oneself. The metaphysical self performs no independent normative function; it is invoked to authorize judgments already grounded in enacted identity.

This point also clarifies why analytic debates about personal identity, while philosophically rigorous, do not resolve the ethical problem at issue here. Theories such as Derek Parfit's theory of psychological continuity²¹ or Noonan's criteria of persistence²² attempt to spell out the

²⁰ This argument does not deny the phenomenological reality of self-experience. Phenomenological accounts emphasize that subjectivity is given through a pre-reflective first-personal perspective rather than through access to a metaphysical essence. Dan Zahavi describes this as the intrinsic "mineness" of experience (see Dan Zahavi, *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19). Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's account of narrative identity understands the self as constituted through temporally extended patterns of commitment rather than as a fixed ontological substrate (see Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 114).

²¹ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 279.

²² Harold W. Noonan, *Personal Identity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019), 2.

conditions under which identity endures over time. Yet, as Kripke reminds us, identity does not depend on our ability to articulate those conditions.²³ More importantly, ethical life does not pause until metaphysics is settled. We must act, commit, and assess ourselves even when identity remains epistemically indeterminate.

Once this is recognized, the ethical significance of enactment becomes clear. Ethical evaluation must attend to enacted commitments rather than to metaphysical identity. The question is no longer whether actions correspond to an inaccessible metaphysical core, but whether the commitments we enact sustain coherence and accountability. The ethical demand does not disappear under conditions of metaphysical uncertainty; it simply relocates.

This relocation makes visible the ethical framework that replaces authenticity. If metaphysical identity cannot function as an epistemically accessible ground, then ethical life must be oriented toward the enacted structures through which identity becomes intelligible. Sincerity, understood as fidelity to one's enacted commitments under conditions of epistemic constraint, provides such an orientation. Unlike authenticity, sincerity does not presuppose access to a metaphysical identity independent of enactment. It evaluates identity as it becomes available in practice, rather than as it exists in itself. By distinguishing metaphysical identity from its epistemic availability, Kripke's framework allows us to relinquish authenticity without relinquishing ethical responsibility.

This prepares the constructive turn that follows. Once authenticity is recognized as a metaphysical fiction—an appeal to an inaccessible ground—ethical evaluation must instead operate at the level of the enacted commitments through which identity is sustained. The next section develops sincerity as the ethical framework appropriate to fictional reality, where identity is constituted not by metaphysical essence but through accountable enactment.

5. From Authenticity to Sincerity: An Ethics for Fictional Reality

If authenticity fails under conditions of performativity and hyperreality, the ethical consequence cannot be the abandonment of normative evaluation altogether. What collapses in the contemporary condition is not the need for ethical judgment, but a specific ontological assumption

²³ Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 38.

underwriting it: the belief that moral evaluation must be grounded in access to a stable metaphysical identity. Once this assumption is relinquished, the ethical problem is transformed. The question is no longer how to live in accordance with an inaccessible inner ground, but how to evaluate lives that are necessarily mediated, enacted, and constituted through representation. Under these conditions, sincerity—properly reconceived—emerges as the ethical virtue appropriate to fictional reality.

Unlike authenticity, sincerity does not presuppose epistemic access to a metaphysical identity whose truth must be discovered and expressed. Historically, as Lionel Trilling observes, sincerity concerned the alignment between one's avowed commitments and one's enacted roles.²⁴ It regulated ethical life at the level of intelligible conduct rather than metaphysical self-disclosure. While modern authenticity displaced sincerity by relocating ethical authority within an inward ground, this paper argues that sincerity must be reclaimed—not as a return to pre-modern conventionalism, but as an ethical orientation appropriate to conditions in which identity is accessible only through its enactment. In fictional reality, sincerity names the ethical demand to inhabit one's enacted commitments responsibly, rather than appealing to an inaccessible metaphysical ground as their justification.

To render this ethical orientation philosophically tractable, this paper introduces what may be called the Spectrum of Sincerity. The spectrum is not a binary distinction between sincerity and insincerity, nor a moral ranking of persons. Rather, it provides criteria for evaluating enacted identity under conditions in which metaphysical identity cannot function as a normative reference point. These criteria—coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumentality—make ethical evaluation possible without presupposing the metaphysics of authenticity.

This shift from authenticity to sincerity is not merely terminological but structural. Authenticity assesses enactment by reference to a presumed metaphysical ground; sincerity assesses it in terms of its immanent normative features. The difference is decisive because only the latter remains available under conditions of epistemic constraint. Coherence, aspirational direction, and non-instrumental commitment are features of enacted identity itself, not speculative claims about an inaccessible interior. Sincerity therefore offers an ethical framework that re-

²⁴ Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 2.

mains viable once metaphysical identity can no longer serve as a final point of justification.

5.1. Coherence: Intelligibility Across Enactment

The first criterion, coherence, asks whether a person's enacted identity holds together across contexts and over time. Coherence does not require identical behavior in every situation. Rather, it means that one's enacted commitments form a recognizable and accountable pattern. Multiplicity of roles is not itself an ethical failure. Ethical concern arises when enacted commitments shift in ways that undermine their coherence or their authority as commitments. A sincere enacted identity exhibits continuity of normative orientation even as it adapts to distinct environments.

Contemporary digital self-presentation provides a clear illustration. Individuals routinely inhabit multiple enacted identities across platforms—professional, personal, anonymous. From the standpoint of authenticity, such multiplicity appears as fragmentation or falsity. The Spectrum of Sincerity, by contrast, asks whether these enactments remain intelligible as expressions of sustained commitments. Do they reflect a coherent normative trajectory, or do they shift in response to external incentives?

Coherence, in this sense, does not mean metaphysical unity; it means normative intelligibility. It does not demand transparency or perfect consistency, but it does require that enacted commitments remain answerable to one another over time. When enacted identities systematically contradict one another in ways that undermine accountability, sincerity breaks down—not because a metaphysical essence has been violated, but because normative answerability has collapsed.

One might object that this requirement either reintroduces authenticity under another name or treats the ordinary multiplicity of social roles as a moral failing. But the Spectrum of Sincerity does not treat multiplicity as an ethical defect. Its concern is not with occupying different roles, but with opportunistic incoherence—performances that invoke identity claims as normative credentials without sustaining them as commitments, or that are abandoned when their instrumental value disappears. Coherence here is not metaphysical unity but practical answerability: the minimal condition under which enacted identity can remain a locus of ethical responsibility.

5.2. Aspirational Orientation: Ethical Direction Without Essence

The second criterion, aspirational orientation, asks whether enacted identity displays a sustained normative direction over time. Authenticity assumes that ethical life consists in expressing a pre-existing self. Sincerity, by contrast, understands ethical identity as something that takes shape through commitment across time. Enacted identity is oriented not toward uncovering an inner ground, but toward living out the commitments one affirms.

This distinction becomes especially clear in contemporary ethical and political life. People often commit themselves to ideals that exceed their present capacities or settled dispositions. From the perspective of authenticity, such enactments can appear hypocritical or inauthentic, since they do not reflect a stable underlying identity. Within the Spectrum of Sincerity, however, the question is different: do these enactments express a sustained normative orientation? Aspirational sincerity treats identity not as a hidden essence to be uncovered, but as a trajectory formed through accountable commitment.

This criterion makes ethical development possible even under conditions of epistemic constraint. Agents are evaluated not by their fidelity to an inaccessible metaphysical ground, but by how durable and serious their enacted commitments remain over time. Ethical judgment therefore turns on the direction and stability of one's normative orientation rather than on correspondence to a pre-existing identity.

5.3. Non-Instrumentality: Commitment Beyond Strategic Advantage

The third criterion, non-instrumentality, asks whether enacted commitments genuinely bind the person who makes them, rather than functioning merely as tools for advantage. Ethical failure occurs when commitments are adopted or abandoned solely for strategic gain. A sincere enacted identity sustains its commitments even when doing so is difficult or costly, rather than treating them as instruments for external ends. This does not require purity of motive. It does require that enacted commitments continue to carry normative weight even when they cease to be advantageous. Their force lies not in their utility, but in their capacity to obligate conduct over time.

Corporate ethical discourse offers a clear illustration. Organiza-

tions often enact commitments to ethical values as elements of brand identity. When those commitments are discarded at the first sign of cost, their instrumental character becomes visible. The failure is not enactment itself, but the absence of binding commitment.

Non-instrumentality thus establishes the minimal condition under which enacted identity can function as a locus of ethical responsibility. Without this condition, enacted identity becomes indistinguishable from strategic adaptation, and ethical evaluation loses its object.

5.4. Sincerity as the Ethical Orientation of Fictional Reality

Taken together, these criteria show why sincerity—not authenticity—fits the conditions of fictional reality. Authenticity measures identity against an inaccessible metaphysical ground. Sincerity evaluates enacted identity through normative coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumental commitment. Where authenticity looks backward toward essence, sincerity demands accountability within action.

This shift does not weaken ethical responsibility; it clarifies where it actually operates. Ethical life unfolds not through correspondence to a hidden metaphysical core, but through sustained answerability to the commitments one enacts. In fictional reality, identity does not stand behind performance as its silent guarantor. It becomes intelligible through enactment itself. Sincerity provides the terms on which enacted identity can be judged without appeal to foundations we cannot access.

Sincerity therefore appears not as a weakened substitute for authenticity, but as the form ethical seriousness takes under contemporary conditions. It preserves the possibility of evaluation while relinquishing the metaphysical picture that authenticity requires. What remains is not moral relativism, but a disciplined practice of coherence, orientation, and commitment enacted over time.

6. Conclusion

The ethical ideal of authenticity has long promised moral clarity grounded in fidelity to an inner truth. To live authentically, on this view, is to align one's enacted life with an identity that stands behind it and authorizes it. This paper has argued that such an ideal can no longer function as a workable ethical framework—not because contemporary subjects are uniquely fragmented, but because the metaphysical and epistemic condi-

tions that sustain authenticity no longer hold. The distinction between identity and its expression, on which authenticity depends, cannot serve as a stable normative foundation in a world where identity is formed through performative enactment and mediated representation.

The philosophical developments examined here illuminate the structure of this breakdown. Butler shows that identity does not exist as a pregiven substance independent of its enactment, but emerges through normatively structured practices. Baudrillard further unsettles the picture by challenging the distinction between enactment and reality itself, describing a social world in which appeals to an independent ontological ground lose their force. Kripke's distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility explains why authenticity nevertheless retains its appeal: metaphysical identity may remain conceivable, but it does not follow that it can guide ethical life. Authenticity thus functions as a metaphysical fiction—not necessarily false, but unable to serve as an operative normative ground.

Yet the failure of authenticity does not entail the collapse of ethical responsibility. Ethical life does not depend on access to a hidden metaphysical core, but on the commitments through which identity becomes intelligible. Once identity is understood as accessible only through enactment, ethical evaluation must take place at that level. The question shifts: not whether action corresponds to an inaccessible essence, but whether enacted commitments sustain coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumental commitment over time.

The Spectrum of Sincerity developed here provides the terms for that evaluation. By assessing enacted identity through coherence, aspirational orientation, and non-instrumental commitment, sincerity offers standards of judgment that do not rely on unverifiable claims about metaphysical essence. It treats enacted identity not as a distortion of some deeper reality, but as the only domain in which responsibility can meaningfully operate. In fictional reality, where identity is always mediated and enacted, sincerity replaces authenticity as the form ethical seriousness takes.

This reorientation also reshapes the familiar demand to “be oneself.” What matters is no longer fidelity to an inaccessible inner ground, but fidelity to the commitments one sustains in practice. Responsibility arises not from correspondence to essence, but from accountability within enactment.

Fictional reality does not signal the end of ethical seriousness. It marks a shift in where seriousness resides. The loss of metaphysical certainty does not dissolve normativity; it clarifies where normativity actually operates. Ethical life unfolds not through the discovery of an inner truth, but through the steady enactment of commitments that make identity intelligible and answerable over time.

Sincerity, in this sense, is not a substitute for authenticity. It is the form ethical responsibility takes in a world where identity can no longer ground itself. This possibility also opens a dialogue with traditions that have long understood identity as constituted through enacted and relational commitments rather than metaphysical essence. On that view, sincerity is not merely a contemporary alternative to authenticity, but a structural feature of ethical life under present conditions.