Agency in search of a function

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Abstract: My argument focuses on Chapter Ten, where Millgram argues that a family of recent theories of agency mistakenly transfers a model of agency that works for parts of a life to a person's life as a whole. As serial hyperspecializers, we are segmented agents. In their efforts at explaining the distinction between attitudes (or actions) that are merely attributable to an agent *versus* those that are attributable in a superlative sense, philosophers produce conceptual devices that actually fail to capture what happens in the crucial interstices between segments. Without myself proposing to defend any particular recent account of agency, I examine below why this merely-superlatively attributable distinction matters. Picking up some threads from three nineteenth-century works of literature, I suggest that this distinction helps us to identify whether or not someone is being in earnest about life. I conclude the discussion by first considering what difference segmented agency makes to my account and then by taking a look at another literary work, Goethe's *Faust*, in order to motivate mild skepticism about whether we are likely to find a conceptual device that can help us in our passages from one segment of agency to another.

Keywords: agency; policy, Bratmanian; literature.

As many students and academic professionals can attest, philosophy can often seem like an inhuman enterprise. In his recent book, *The Great Endarkenment: Philosophy for an Age of Hyperspecialization*, Elijah Millgram takes up the thought that much recent philosophy is inhuman, though in a sense other than the one intended by the colloquial complaint.[1] The central move in his examination of an impressive range of recent philosophical debate is to argue that much of the most important recent theorizing in philosophy has been unwittingly designed to apply to beings that belong to a species other than our own. To borrow and expand an observation Millgram makes in a footnote (and a lot of excellent argumentation takes place in the footnotes of this book), much philosophy amounts to intellectual Taylorism. The concern

[1] Millgram 2015. Hereafter cited as *GE* with accompanying page(s).

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with Taylorism isn't that Taylor wasn't very nice to his employees; instead, the problem with Taylorism is something like the kind of problem Marx thought capitalism more generally faced. Capitalism (and its institutions), according to Marx (I'm thinking of the so-called "Paris Manuscripts" of 1844), alienates us from our "species-being"; that's his way of saying that capitalism is set up for beings who differ from us in ways about which we care a lot. (Marx would also be sympathetic with the idea that a lot of philosophy is inhuman in this sense).[2]

My focus in what follows is on the argument of Chapter Ten, in which Millgram levels the charge of intellectual Taylorism (though without using the phrase) against some of the best recent thinking about agency. Singling out Michael Bratman's views as exemplary of the whole domain, Millgram argues that theories of this sort go astray by transferring a model of agency that works for parts of a life to a person's life as a whole. As serial hyperspecializers, we are segmented agents. In their efforts at explaining the distinction between attitudes (or actions) that are merely attributable to an agent *versus* those that are attributable in a superlative sense, philosophers produce conceptual devices that actually fail to capture what happens in the crucial interstices between segments. Without myself proposing to defend any particular recent account of agency, I examine below why this merely-superlatively attributable distinction matters. Picking up some threads from three nineteenth-century works of literature, I suggest that this distinction helps us to identify whether or not someone is being in earnest about life. I conclude the discussion by first considering what difference segmented agency makes to my account and then taking a look at another literary work, Goethe's *Faust*, in order to motivate mild skepticism about whether we are likely to find a conceptual device that can help us in our passages from one segment of agency to another.

[2] The point of these observations is certainly not that Marx got there first. What Marx is pointing out is that people create their environments through the mediation of conceptual structures and that, through a process called alienation, what people originally make comes to look to them as if it were some external and independently real thing. Marx, as far as I can tell, didn't say anything about serial hyperspecialization and its attendant difficulties (though he did have a lot to say about the division of labor). By bringing in Marx, my intention is to point to a valuable upshot of Millgram's proposal about doing philosophy for historians of philosophy (a subdisciplinary niche that I spend a lot of my time occupying): doing the history of philosophy can be a philosophically worthwhile thing to do when one focuses on the moments when philosophers have tried to think outside the box of a particular tradition (or conversation within a tradition), and many of these moments occur when philosophers train their gaze on human nature. Some very instructive examples can be seen in *The Great Endarkenment*, in Millgram's treatment of Comte and Mill in Chapter 5, and of Nietzsche in Chapter 10.

1. *Segmentation and attribution*

In Chapter Ten of *The Great Endarkenment*, titled "Segmented Agency", Millgram tackles a central concern in a great deal of contemporary work in analytic meta-ethics. As he observes, many influential arguments in this space appeal to some view or other of what an agent is (*GE*: 234). He provides a useful digest of key conceptions of agency that are operative in these arguments:

> […] agents produce actions which can be in a very robust sense attributed to them, actions they *own* because the agents are identified with, rather than alienated from, their choices; agents have "practical identities" or "ground projects" which they may lose, but cannot disown; agents do not pursue projects at cross-purposes with one another; having made a decision, they follow through on it (and do not instead act on some contrary impulse); they possess a unified point of view from which they render judgments about what is worth doing and what they will do; when they act, they act so as to understand what they are doing and why; their choices are governed by policies which dictate how competing reasons will be taken into account (*GE*: 234).

Millgram highlights the normative register in which many of these invocations of agency are made; whether said explicitly or not, the thought is that someone has gotten things importantly wrong if one lacks one or more of the features of agency mentioned in the just cited passage (*GE*: 235). The focus of Chapter 10 is, more specifically, on how these features of agency are often invoked in order to ground the practically important distinction between actions (or intentions, commitments, desires, etc.) that are *merely* or *simply attributable* to someone and those that are more *superlatively attributable*.

Millgram focus his own investigation on Michael Bratman's recent contributions, partly in view of the sheer size of discussion. Millgram's perspicuous paraphrase of Bratman's account goes like this:

> The agent is organized by and around a set of mutually compatible long-term policies. These policies specify what counts as a reason, and how much of one, when you're making up your mind what to do; they lead you to act on (or make you balk at acting on) other garden variety desires and intentions; they are reflexively self-endorsing. Because these policies are such important contributors to your personal identity over time, and because they are policies of endorsing or disavowing reasons for action, what it is for you to identify with an attitude – for it to be *really* rather than *merely* yours – is for it to be endorsed by such a policy (*GE*: 240-41).

For most of the rest of the chapter, Bratman's view functions as exemplary of the current state of discourse and serves as the target of Millgram's critical scrutiny. Millgram's argument is meant to stick, *mutatis mutandis*, to more or less every recent appeal to agency in meta-ethics. His own argument turns on

the conception of human nature that underwrites the whole argumentative trajectory of *The Great Endarkenment*.[3] Human beings can best be thought of as *serial hyperspecializers*, and such creatures are *segmented agents*. As Millgram puts it towards the end of the chapter, "[a]gents are interfaces that you conjure up to meet the needs of the moment" (*GE*: 263). With this in hand, it looks as though Bratman's policy-based conception of agency "can be no more than half of the theory [of agency]" (*GE*: 247). This is, in a nutshell, because "we should expect to find the psyches of serial hyperspecializers to be a mixture of plans or policies (suitable for use in relatively stable niches), on the one hand, and psychic equipment for coping with the impossible-to-anticipate, on the other […]" (*GE*: 247). Millgram illustrates the latter situation by imagining the situation of a German Jewish academic philosopher in the early 1930's.[4] A Bratmanian policy, according to Millgram, would not have the resources to allow the individual in question to deal successfully with such an unprecedented situation. Moreover, the presence of such a policy does not explain how it is that the radical change required of such a person could be properly or superlatively attributed to him (*GE*: 248). Yet, and here's the key move, deciding to radically alter or even completely drop one's pre-existing policies in the face of the unanticipated is the supreme example of what it is to "think for oneself", and thus it is precisely such actions that ought to be superlatively attributable (*GE*: 250). A Bratmanian policy can only ground the distinction between the superlatively attributable and the merely attributable in "well-structured and well-understood environments" (*GE*: 251).

In the final step of Millgram's argument in Chapter 10, he suggests a different account of the merely-superlatively attributable distinction. Importantly, Millgram recognizes that the account he offers of the function such a distinction might have for serial hyperspecializers is not the only one in the offing. His point is that the function he cites isn't one that can be adequately modeled or explained in terms of plans, policies, and the like. In his own words: "When the time comes, I will propose a function (not, I expect, the only one; I mean only to be making a start on the problem I'm posing) for the distinction between what you really want, believe, and do and what you in some lesser sense want, believe, and do" (*GE*: 243). (This observation is what I want to exploit further on). In crisis situations (which, as serial hyperspecializers, we face a lot of the time, and not just in dramatic historical moments like the 1930's), it be-

[3] As he puts it in Chapter Three, borrowing an Aristotelian term, Millgram maintains that most of philosophy is designed for beings whose *ergon* is quite different from our own (*GE*: 65).

[4] For a real-life example of the way one academic (though not a philosopher) tried to cope with the *Machtergreifung* and its consequences, see Klemperer 1991-2001.

hooves us to be able to distinguish *ourselves* from any given policy or plan, for the simple reason that doing so helps us avoid slipping back into the policy or plan that we are actively seeking to reform or abandon. "So a segmented agent needs to be able to say, in what we can think of as a proleptic or anticipatory register: No, that's not *my* policy anymore. This is *a* function that the distinction between merely mine and superlatively mine serves; I strongly suspect that it is not its only function […]" (*GE*: 257).

2. *On taking life seriously: some literary evidence*

As I mentioned just previously, Millgram happily grants that the function he proposes for the merely-superlatively attributable distinction is unlikely to be the only one out there. Instead, the focal claim is that the family of views that trade on arguments about agency is not equipped to yield a workable model of the function that he proposes. Given that this is a function well-suited to the needs of serial hyperspecializers, and that we are in fact such creatures, the further implication is that such views trade on a group of related concepts that don't tell us all that much about what we're actually like. Picking up on Millgram's suggestion that further potential functions are out there, I want to propose another one that, I think, helps to explain part of the appeal of the kinds of views for which Millgram takes Bratman to be exemplary. The function that I propose here is that the merely-superlatively attributable distinction sometimes helps us to flag the presence or absence of something that is of genuine concern: we want to know when people are being serious. Some recent and popular pieces of philosophical equipment, such as "practical identities", "ground projects", and, perhaps, Bratmanian policies (particularly insofar as they account for one's identification with an attitude) are, I submit, at least partial reflections of what is sometimes at issue in making this distinction.

Now there isn't, or at least I don't think there is, a ready-made common sense concept that captures the concern in question. There are a number of qualities out there about which people sometimes care a lot and which are floating around in the same glass as the quality that interests me. These include (on the positive side) integrity, sincerity, honesty, authenticity and (on the negative side) mendacity, frivolity, glibness, flippantness, and the like.[5] For the purpose of the present discussion, I'm going to adopt one phrase out there as a marker for the concern in question: being in earnest (and its

[5] One issue here is that it's not obvious that there are unified concepts of any of these qualities. *In re* integrity, for example, see Cox et al., 2003.

opposite). My claim is that we sometimes care about making the distinction between desires, intentions, actions, and the like that are simply or *merely* mine and those that are *really* or *integrally* mine because making this distinction is important for gauging the extent to which one is *in earnest about life*.

There are doubtless many familiar instances in which the quality of being in earnest or not takes on particular relevance. One that comes to my mind derives from the world of TV (I'm still trying to decide if knowing about this example is an attitude with which I personally want to identify). For a couple of seasons in the mid-late 2000s, VH1 hosted a reality dating series called *Flavor of Love*, in which a group of female contestants strove to win the heart of 1980's hip hop star Flavor Flav. One of the things that quickly congealed in the series was the apparently primary value to the contestants of "being real." From what I gathered, being real meant *really* having romantic feelings for Flavor Flav (whom none of the contestants had ever met in person, and about whose *oeuvre* many appeared wholly ignorant), as opposed to, say, merely wanting to advance one's own burgeoning reality television career by appearing alongside him on the screen. Contestants who were judged to lack this quality were roundly rebuked by other contestants. Bracketing the admittedly absurd premise of the show and the damaging implications of it for anyone appearing on it attaining the quality of "being real", it nevertheless seems clear that it wasn't enough to merely, say, be willing to hang around with Flavor Flav. Instead, one needed to be serious about one's feelings about him.

This example is obviously silly, but it helps to get at the way in which the merely-superlatively attributable distinction is bound together with being in earnest (or not). I now want to consider several other illustrations of this proposal that have in common with *Flavor of Love* the fact they are products of deliberate contrivance, in this case, on the part of canonical literary figures rather than of Hollywood producers. The character-type I want to explore here is represented by the following three fictional *personae*: (1) Johannes in Kierkegaard's *Seducer's Diary* (itself part of *Either/Or*); (2) the unnamed narrator in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*; and (3) the title character in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. These works appeared respectively in 1843, 1864, and 1891. That all these people are creations of the literary imagination might suggest, to some at least, that the value of being in earnest expressed in these examples is therefore not a real, common sense, value, but rather a made up one that makes for good entertainment. I think that this point raises important questions about what can be done philosophically with literature. Without really answering any of these questions, I will simply urge that the frequent recurrence of a certain character-type in nineteenth-century literature suggests that we are dealing with a real-life

concern, though one that may well be presented in an exaggerated manner by the authors in question.[6]

While I'm making caveats, I'll also point out that my reading of this character-type is not meant to be *moralistic*. None of the individual characters that I discuss could be justly accused of being decent human beings, but that feature is not what interests me here. I want to follow, as closely as I can, the approach adopted by one of the authors, Søren Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or* (the larger work that contains the piece I'm going to consider below). Briefly, *Either/Or* is organized around the contrast between two views of what it is that's worthwhile in life (along with advice about how to pursue that), presented more or less as the views of two different individuals, A and B. Without going into any of the details here, A's view of life is an *aesthetic* one, while B's is *ethical*. What Kierkegaard does as best he can is to let each one speak for himself. When it comes time, then, for B to address A, it won't do for B to simply condemn A for adopting an apparently amoral view of life (this is why, for example, B tries to justify marriage to A in terms of its "aesthetic validity"). Among other reasons, this is because A doesn't even begin to want to grant that it makes sense for anyone to adopt the kind of view that B has in the first place. Kierkegaard himself does not seem much interested in the moral evaluation of either A or B. Instead, he wants to bring out the structure of a kind of life and examine the degree to which it succeeds or fails on its own terms as a good candidate for an individual life. What interests me in the examples that I'm going to present here (including one from Kierkegaard), is also something *structural*. It may be that the character-type presented deserves moral condemnation, but I agree with Kierkegaard that we can make another kind of assessment that does not require moral judgment at all. Another, related, preliminary. I don't mean the use I'm going to make of these examples to depend overly much on some more general view about the philosophical significance of literary works. I hope it is fairly uncontroversial simply to say that certain such works are notable for the ways that they make quite vivid various formal features of different renditions of human life.

There are many ways to characterize the view of life embodied by the narrator, Johannes, in Kierkegaard's *Seducer's Diary*. The differences probably amount to differences of emphasis on the part of the person doing the characterizing. In view of the interest I'm pursuing here, I'm going to characterize Johannes as someone who has a peculiar aversion towards any kind of commitment that might anchor him in his own life. This is not to say that Johannes doesn't care about anything; he cares a lot, for instance, about things that are interesting.

[6] For articulations of some relevant concerns on this score, see Landy 2008 and Vogler 2007.

Instead, what I want to highlight here is that Johannes is averse to anything that might make him too serious about his own life to be able to adequately appreciate it in aesthetic terms. The essay that precedes *Seducer's Diary* in *Either/Or*, entitled "Rotation of Crops", presents something of the same attitude toward life. It is not particularly obvious what the relationship between these two pieces is meant to be, but the "Rotation of Crops" can be partially appreciated as a presentation of Johannes's view of life in a slightly more explicit, theoretical register. The author of that piece (who may or may not be the same as the author of the *Diary*) cautions that a person should never "hoist full sail" in life, and that someone who has adopted his own outlook always "indulges in a certain mistrust" towards both his own endeavors and towards other people.[7]

Staying, however, with the *Diary*, one thing a reader is likely to notice in the narrator's own introduction are a series of clues regarding the overall stance or attitude that the work expresses. The *Diary* is, he announces, composed in a grammatical mood that is "not indicative, but subjunctive" (*EO*: 305). The subjunctive is the grammatical mood employed when talking about a hypothetical, imaginary, or possible situation. A diary is typically meant to represent or describe a person's life, and, unless explicitly describing a day dream, fantasy, or hope for the future, the indicative mood would seem to be the most natural one to use ("Today I took the dog to the vet", not "Were I to take the dog to the vet, I would most likely ask about when the rabies booster might come due"). A diary written in the subjunctive is one that treats life as if it were *hypothetical* or *imaginary*, rather than as a series of episodes that actually take place. Explicating the distinction himself, Johannes insists that his is a diary in which any "actuality" must be "drowned in the poetic."

Moving a bit further on, the diarist expresses his ambition to transform other people into an image of himself, that is, into "unreal people" characterized by a "sterile restlessness" that, importantly, cannot ever amount to any genuine self-reproach or regret (*EO*: 309). To be an unreal person is to inhabit "a kind of dreamland where one is frightened by one's own shadow" (*EO*: 311). In the diary itself, the author describes this intention somewhat differently. His aim is to separate Cordelia, the unlucky object of his interest at this particular point in his life, from any "actuality", to "anesthetize her aesthetically" so that, like him, she no longer has any serious stake in the future (*EO*: 428). To be like him is to be like a mirror, which does not retain the image of what is reflected in it once that thing has moved on (*EO*: 315).

Johannes tries hard to live out this attitude. Throughout the diary, the reader finds him carefully orchestrating various types of aesthetic spectacles

[7] Kierkegaard 1987: p. 293. Hereafter cited as *EO* with accompanying page(s).

involving other people, which can only be properly appreciated, he insists, from a peculiarly detached or disinterested stance. As he or she reads along, a reader is likely to notice the way in which typical markers of reality start to fall by the wayside in the narrative. For instance, in some entries (but not others, which is what suggests to me that Kierkegaard is making a point), the month is not mentioned in the heading. More to the point, the detachment from reality is something at which Johannes must work hard. For instance, as he finds himself beginning to have a stake in his life, he implores the goddess Chance, on whom he aspires to model his own life. In his invocation, he calls Chance "the barren mother of everything" (*EO*: 327). That is, with seeming indifference, Chance produces events randomly, without plan, purpose, or intention. Chance, in other words, doesn't have any ground projects, higher-order desires, or Bratmanian policies. It is vitally important to the diarist that he resist any attempt to overcome or bring order to chance by adopting "principles" or forming a "character"; instead, he strives to surrender himself to the random and accidental (*EO*: 328).

Since love can only be for him a kind of spectacle, rather than a real attachment to someone, it becomes important that he groom his mark, Cordelia, in just the right way (*EO*: 335). He remarks at one point that "[m]y relationship with her is like a dance that is supposed to be danced by two people but is danced by only one. That is, I am the other dancer, but invisible" (*EO*: 380). What this means becomes slightly clearer when the reader catches on to his very deliberate employment of amphiboly in his conversations with her (*EO*: 370). Above all, he must dodge what he calls "the ethical", the realm of interpersonal commitment. Thus, he carefully avoids making any actual promises to Cordelia, while working hard to seem as if he has done so. His "movements", he avers, must be "simulated" (*EO*: 367 et passim).

This brief sampling of remarks and episodes from the *Diary* are meant to suggest, at least in outline, a picture of a stance towards life that lacks and seeks to avoid is any form of seriousness or earnestness such as would derive from commitments, even quite informal ones, to another human being. Such commitments provide what the diarist's tutelary deity, Chance, lacks, namely a connecting thread that binds the episodes of life with one another and comprises a person's stake in those connected episodes as a whole. While it is certainly the case that Johannes the Seducer is a morally dubious person, who very obviously is a serial violator of the Humanity Formulation of the Categorical Imperative, what I hope to have pointed out is something different. Johannes tries his level best to avoid being in earnest about life.

The next character to consider is the unnamed narrator in Fyodor Dostoevsky's 1864 novella, *Notes from Underground* (call him "Underground Man").

In the melancholic manifesto that forms the opening section of the novella, Underground Man announces to his readers that "I've never really been able to be anything: neither spiteful nor good, neither a villain nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect."[8] Indeed, he has no dominant trait or character whatsoever. He is a "characterless creature" who eschews action (i.e., the thing that makes something into an *agent*) because, among other things, action requires or implies some kind of "limitation", i.e., the recognition of some claim or other that entails a commitment that at least gets one part way towards having a character (i.e., towards being the kind of person who has this or that attitude) (*NU*: 8). Indeed, he admits that he is often unable to "resolve" to do anything at all, in contrast with the kind of person who acts immediately from a sense of injured honor without much reflection and without any ironic distance from the motivating attitude (*NU*: 12-13). Instead, Underground Man occupies his figurative "underground", comprised of a "delirium of vacillation" and a convoluted series of "decisions taken once and for all and regretted a minute later" (*NU*: 14-15).

Underground Man goes on to explain how living "underground" also involves a peculiar affectation of a human life.[9] Any temporary effort at living in a more immediate or more fully invested manner soon falls prey to the "chemical decomposition" of reflection (*NU*: 20). This stance is exemplified in the strange pseudo-confession that occupies the remainder of the novella, a confession that is meant to have no audience (since that would presumably imply at least some sense of accountability) and which is very carefully crafted so that the narrator takes no actual responsibility for anything that occurs within it. Indeed, at the close of the piece, Underground Man suggests that he had actually made it all up, that this was merely another one of the "adventures" he had concocted "so that at least I could live somehow." The epigraph at the beginning of the longer narration is a snippet of poetry apparently dealing with regret, confession, and repentance; at the same time, as the narrative unfolds, we realize that these are precisely what the narrator wants to avoid at all costs. To regret something and to repent of it implies one's ownership of the regrettable occurrence. What we get instead is a kind of fantasy, a sort of poetic construction, rather than a sincere baring of the soul. As he says at the conclusion of the story, "we are all agreed amongst ourselves that it is much better to live life according to books. […]. We even find it difficult to be human beings – human beings with our *own* real flesh

[8] Dostoevsky 2008: p. 8. Herafter cited as *NU* with accompanying page(s).

[9] "I thought up adventures for myself, I concocted a life for myself so that at least I could live somehow" (*NU*: 18).

and blood; we're ashamed of it, we consider it a disgrace and strive to be some kind of imaginary type" (*NU*: 122-123).[10]

As he describes his youth, he notes the alteration of contradictory attitudes such as *bonhomie* or conviviality with stereotypical Romantic alienation (*NU*: 47). His efforts at overcoming the latter are tragi-comic failures, such as his attempt to engineer a bar fight at a billiard hall. Like Kierkegaard's Johannes, everything must be carefully orchestrated, all spontaneity must be avoided, and he must refresh himself by seeking refuge in the "beautiful and sublime." The one "sort of friend" he had in his youth was someone whom he wanted to make over in his own image, in whom he longed to inculcate the very same alienation that Dostoevsky's narrator experiences. As he accompanies his erstwhile dinner companions to the bordello at the end of another humiliating evening, he muses to himself "[s]o this is it, this is an encounter with 'reality,'" only to quickly lose himself in a revenge fantasy that is not even of his own devising, but is instead borrowed from Russian literature (*NU*: 17). Similarly, during his initial encounter with the young prostitute, Liza, he narrates a largely fictional tale and admits that the entire conversation is a kind of "game" (*NU*: 90). Both here and in their final, disastrous encounter, the narrator is disturbed by the recognition of his own feelings of regret, which imply precisely the kind of ownership of his own life that he otherwise assiduously strives to avoid. For instance, he returns some money to his companion Simonov along with a convoluted note that, to his mind, allows him to evade the admission that he actually owed Simonov anything in the first place (*NU*: 102-103).

Whatever else one might make of Dostoevsky's creation, it is, I hope, fairly uncontroversial to say that Underground Man is structured in a way reminiscent of Kierkegaard's Johannes the Seducer.[11] Underground Man also wants to make sure that all of his "movements" are "simulated", and he does this by avoiding any sort of responsibility-conferring commitments. Moreover, to the extent that he is able to pull this off, he also thereby avoids commitments that constitute him as a certain kind of person with a determinate character. The case of Underground Man makes the connection between superlative at-

[10] Notice here how the inclusive "we" functions to diffuse responsibility in such a way that the author of the "confession" can himself claim that he bears no particular relationship to the events he has described.

[11] While this claim is speculative at this point, this similarity may partly be due to a common prototype, the title character in F.H. Jacobi's *Edward Allwill's Collection of Letters*. Reinhard Lauth argues that Dostoevsky was familiar with Jacobi's work, and that the patronym of Stavrogin in *The Demons* (Vsevolodovich) is a more or less accurate Russian rendering of the name Allwill. See Lauth 1973. Kierkegaard was certainly familiar with some of Jacobi's other works. Still, I have no direct evidence of a connection. It may be that Jacobi was simply interested in a phenomenon similar to that presented later by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky.

tribution and commitment more obvious than that of Johannes, though the connection is present in *A Seducer's Diary* as well. If he can successfully avoid undertaking any commitments that confer responsibility on him, then he can also see to it that the episodes of his life are just that, episodes, rather than events that he himself has authored in any stronger sense. Like moves in a game, the things he does really do take place but lack any further import. Furthermore, as with Johannes the Seducer (and perhaps some of the contestants on *Flavor of Love*), it is Underground Man's relationships to other people that are especially marked by this peculiar unreality.

Like Kierkegaard's Johannes and Dostoevsky's Underground Man, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler is an aesthete who is keenly focused on the conflict between the beautiful and the sublime, on the one hand, and the tawdriness of reality, on the other.[12] In common with all of the characters examined so far, this stance is linked to a tendency to aestheticize or "stage" the lives of others. Her predominant mood is one of boredom, an apt expression of her alienation from life. Even more striking is her alienation from her own body. The concerns of an academic career (exemplified by her hapless husband, Tesman) or of domesticity (articulated early on in the play by Aunt Julle) appear trivial to her. Her husband's old slippers and Aunt Julle's hat – the everyday accouterments of life – strike her with a kind of revulsion. She is keen to disown her current life as wife and mother-to-be by retaining mementos of her own, highly romanticized, background, particularly a pair of pistols that come to play a key role in the drama.

As the drama develops, we find Hedda developing a kind of voyeuristic fascination with the trials and tribulations of the other characters, feigning a genuine interest in them in order to extract the titillating details of their romantic entanglements and various other misfortunes. The degree of her willingness to manipulate other people as aesthetic spectacles is dramatized by Ibsen via her many momentous silences. For example, she chooses not to reveal to her erstwhile "friend" Thea that she is the woman from Lövborg's past. Later, at even more crucial moment in the plot, she likewise chooses not to reveal her knowledge of the whereabouts of Lövborg's precious manuscript. Fundamentally, however, these relationships reflect her own emptiness, a kind of alienation from her own life. As she idly plays with her father's pistols at the beginning of Act Two, she asks the astonished Brack, "What in God's name do you want me to do with myself?"[13] Later, when Lövborg

[12] My reading of *Hedda Gabler* is indebted to Moi 2008, as well as to conversations with Kristin Gjesdal and a number of students in a course taught in 2015 under the aegis of the University of Utah's Honors College.

[13] Ibsen 2008: 200.

reveals that he will not compete with Tesman for a prestigious professorship, Hedda is utterly indifferent.

Like Underground Man, Hedda Gabler is portrayed in part as a victim of a certain social order. In her case, the fact that she is female in the patriarchal world of late nineteenth-century Europe goes some way towards explaining her sense of alienation from the life that she has been led to lead. In the case of Underground Man, he hails from the lower rungs of the tsarist social order and his advancement, such as it is, is due to education; in other words, he has a considerable chip on his shoulder. Without denying the significance of the social commentaries offered by both Dostoevsky and Ibsen, my attention is focused on something more abstract. Hedda Gabler shares with Underground Man an aestheticizing attitude toward life that is paired with a very deep sense of detachment from her own existence. As her insistent question to Brack indicates, she doesn't quite know what to do with herself. She lacks commitments to the sorts of things that generally anchor a person in her own life, e.g., family, parenthood, friendship, or even ordinary objects in her immediate environs. The pistols are an exception, though they seem like exotic outliers in the household of a stolid *petit bourgeois* like Tesman. For Hedda, life itself is a kind of amusement and the people who comprise her world are, at best, temporary balms for her boredom.

Before considering what these literary examples reveal about the importance of the difference between actions that are merely attributable and those that are superlatively attributable, it's worthwhile to consider why our authors might be concerned with the sorts of personalities exemplified by these emblematic characters. Put more briefly and as a question, why might they think that such personalities are problematic? One possible answer, alluded to above, is that these authors are engaging in a kind of social criticism. Perhaps they are suggesting that if nineteenth-century European societies produce people like *these*, then there must be something wrong with those societies. While there are reasons to think that they'd agree with this observation, this doesn't, by itself, explain why such personalities are objectionable in the first place; rather, this line of thought assumes that they are, and then shifts the focus to how the larger society might have gone wrong somewhere.

Another possible explanation for this shared concern with a lack of earnestness in life might be that Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Ibsen hold a social conception of personality and employ these characters to illustrate their conception.[14] The shared view that I am attributing here is just that relationships

[14] This proposal emerged in conversations with a group of students in the Honors College at the University of Utah. In the background of the conversation, for me anyway, was Hegel's theory of rec-

(with implied commitments) are constitutive of individual personality, such that who a person is bottoms out in whom a person loves (in a broad sense that includes romantic attachments, friendships, familial bonds, etc.). Since Johannes the Seducer, Underground Man, and Hedda Gabler each assiduously avoid the commitments implied by personality-constituting relationships, it is almost as though they wind up not being anybody at all. But, they might ask, what's wrong with *that*? After all, with the exception of Hedda (who commits suicide), these characters seem to live their lives just fine on their own terms.

One final candidate for the driving concern in these portrayals is an interest in exploring incoherent or irrational personalities to highlight the conflict inherent in a widely shared notion of freedom. All three of the characters I've described above place a premium on being free in the sense of being unfettered and independent. They want their lives to be just their own, without belonging to or being beholden to anyone or anything else. In an effort to attain this goal, they do not (in the words of Kierkegaard's pseudonym "A") "hoist full sail" in life, because to embrace any commitments or commitment-implying relationships would compromise their freedom, to run into a "wall", as Underground Man puts it. But this very quest for freedom winds up in a state in which none of them really lives their respective lives, abiding instead in a "subjunctive" mood hardly compatible with claiming to be a free individual.

While this way of understanding what makes these personalities problematic is more satisfying than the two previously countenanced options, I don't think it is entirely sufficient on its own. This is because, on the face of it, the three characters' shared desire to be free individuals is something that is optional or rescindable. There's also good reason to think that it is historically conditioned; would our medieval ancestors, who rarely bothered to sign their own artistic masterpieces, have shared this desire? If I'm right that this desire is optional or rescindable, then the incoherence described above is merely conditional, and, presumably, fairly easy to avoid.

3. *A functional proposal*

The literary evidence that I have assembled in the preceding section adds up to a portrayal of a certain stance towards life, one in which one is not in

ognition, most famously explicated in Chapter Four of *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the discussion of "Lordship and Bondage." Briefly, Hegel's basic thought is that being an agent requires reflection and self-limitation, and the latter require confrontation with other people. But, one "self-consciousness" (to use Hegel's language) only receives its "completion" or "satisfaction" when the confrontation is resolved into mutual recognition.

earnest with life. The characters presented by Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Ibsen do not overlap in every respect, but there are some shared qualities that together suggest the absence of some important features of agency that are sometimes accounted for in recent philosophy with devices like practical identities, ground projects, higher-order desires, or policies. The type of person portrayed in these literary works is the type of person who lacks or even actively avoids commitments that appropriately anchor a person in his or her own life. This is the type of person who finds life unimportant, who is alienated from it, and whose attitude towards life can be captured as an aesthetic one or as one that comes close to the attitude a person adopts towards the episodes in a game. To the extent that a person's life is, with some rare exceptions, a life with other people, it is perhaps unsurprising that the lack of earnestness about life that these characters express travels along with a particularly potent kind of insincerity.[15]

It is important to say here that I am not claiming that the literary evidence I have presented vindicates any of the particular theories of agency that have played important roles in recent meta-ethical argumentation. As a general rule, one should be careful about treating a complex literary characterization as something that boils down to the kind of finely tuned conceptual apparatus that characterizes our best philosophical theorizing. For one thing, as my remarks at the end of the previous section indicate, good literature is typically over-determined when it comes to the artistic exploration of interesting thoughts. I also suspect, though I don't have a handy argument for this, that there is something about the kind of thing literary fiction is that means it is not simply substitutable with the products of carefully constructed philosophical theorizing. So, my intention is not to vindicate any of the particular theories of agency or of what makes agency important (for which Millgram, for good reasons, takes Bratman's view to be paradigmatic). Instead, I hope to be making a case for another function that the distinction between attitudes and actions that are *merely attributable* and those that are *superlative attributable* might play. In the remainder of the discussion, I will briefly describe what I think that function might be. Then, I will consider one way in which Millgram's

[15] It is notable that all three authors focus on the intimate relations of their respective characters in order to explore their sheer *weirdness*. There are probably many reasons for this. Here's one that suggests itself to me. Their common attitude toward life involves trying to deflate or ignore any sort of claim so as not to acknowledge it and, at least in part, not to spoil the properly aesthetic appreciation of life. While people have claims on themselves (for instance, my physical well-being does put a kind of claim on me specifically), or parts of themselves make claims on other parts (my research projects make claims on my leisure pursuits), the claims of other people are particularly insistent and pretty recalcitrant. Thus, how people like Johannes or Hedda react (or, more likely, fail to react) to such claims illustrates their whole personality structure in a dramatic and effective way.

conception of serial hyperspecializers as segmented agents makes a difference by considering yet another literary example makes.

Recall that the merely-superlatively attributable distinction is being taken here to be a common sense distinction, rather than a philosophical (or literary) artifact. In everyday life, people take an interest in what other people think, intend, feel, or do for the obvious reason that these attitudes and actions very often have some direct impact on them.[16] In taking this interest, people also sometimes want to make a distinction between what someone happened to think, intend, feel, or do, and what a person really meant. If one is being generous, one might, for instance, say "yes, she said that; but that's not who she really is", or "that's not the Sam that I know."[17] This distinction takes on altogether more urgency, as Millgram observes, in forensic situations. It also matters in the intra- (as opposed to inter-) personal domain. Anyone given to self-examination of any kind is likely to become aware of attitudes and actions that exist, but which are of a kind from which one is also concerned to distance oneself. When this kind of examination is undertaken in good faith (rather than, say, as an exercise in self-soothing), something like the merely-superlatively attributable distinction is likely of great relevance. For instance, after a drive along the Massachusetts Turnpike, I might recall some of the attitudes that emerged for me during the experience, and, in the case of some of those attitudes, I might sincerely say "that's not who I really am" or maybe "wow, where did that one come from?"

What is the function (in such good faith cases) of making this distinction? The literary evidence is helpful here. At least as I have re-presented them, the characters from Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Ibsen described previously are, each in their way, not being serious about life. Indeed, they give the impression of not wanting to be serious about it, because if they were, then one could hold them accountable for the things that they say, think, or do, or perhaps they might find themselves holding themselves accountable. To apply the merely-

[16] It might seem odd to include "feel" in this list of attitudes, since feelings are sometimes considered to be something like involuntary responses. Nevertheless, in everyday life, people are often quite concerned about others' feelings. If you spontaneously feel a twitch of jealousy when I tell you about my successful NEH grant application, and I detect that twitch, then there may be some real consequences that both of us are likely to care about.

[17] One account offered of this ordinary sort of exchange comes from Charles Taylor. In several works, Taylor provides a sort of genealogy of what he and others sometimes call an "expressive" conception of self, which is often historically pinned on Rousseau and on his Romantic heirs. Briefly, the idea is that we have a "true self", perhaps one that we would fully identify with in a Rousseauian state of nature, that can be distinguished from the self or selves that have sedimented on top of it through our socialization. To be authentic is just to express this "true self." The *locus classicus* for this view is Taylor 1989. An abridged account is found in Taylor 1992.

superlatively attributable distinction is to flag oneself or someone else as taking something seriously, as being in earnest. If a person happens not to be serious or in earnest *about anything*, then it is hard to see how that distinction could really get a purchase. As the examples discussed previously all indicate, lacking earnestness in this way (whether episodically or more systemically) has real consequences for the quality of one's relationships. While they certainly make for fascinating reading material, these characters are not the type of people on whom one should depend.

4. *Segment migration*

As described previously, part of Millgram's argument with respect to Bratman's account of the unity of agency in terms of policies turns on an account of human beings as serial hyperspecializers who are, in virtue of that very fact, segmented agents. As serial hyperspecializers, people occupy at various points a bewilderingly large and ever growing number of niches in the world. Successful niche-occupation involves the identification of the stable features of that particular niche and the adoption of policies and procedures cut to its fit (*GE*: 246). People can clearly switch from one niche to another, and can even take up an abode in some domain that largely lacks the kinds of stable features that are amenable to policies and procedures (*GE*: 245-246). Millgram is particularly interested in these migratory episodes in which a person ventures into a genuinely unknown domain such that it is literally impossible to have any antecedent policy about it. Given that such migrations are recurring features of a typical human life, it follows that human beings lead segmented lives. It may be that, in all or most of these segments, people do have something like a Bratmanian policy (or ground project, or higher-order desire, etc.) that forms the centralized basis for executing life in that segment (*GE*: 251). But there is no central structure that is shared by all the segments or that helps one manage migration from one to another. Nonetheless, as Millgram quite reasonably observes, "we *need* intellectual equipment with which we can assess performance in a hiatus between agential segments […]" (*GE*: 257).

Now if I've drawn the right lesson from the literary evidence – roughly, that it's important for people to take life seriously – then a question arises at this point. What is it that could make it such that segmented agents are in earnest with life? After all, perhaps segmented agents can get by just as well by, like Johannes the Seducer, worshipping the goddess Chance. The devices that he excludes from a devout Chance-worshiper's life, such as principles and character, don't seem to be particularly appropriate for segmented agents either.

Indeed, Millgram makes a strong case for doubting that these kinds of devices are of any help at all when it comes to the most decisively important moments in life, those when we migrate between segments.

In order to explore this issue, I'd like to spend the remainder of the discussion with another literary work, this time with Part One of Goethe's *Faust*. The "Prologue in Heaven" describes Faust as having "a heart so restless and profound."[18] One way to say this is that Faust isn't quite sure *who he is*, which no doubt explains the crisis (or series of crises) that he goes on to face in the ensuing drama. Indeed, the scene entitled "Night" shows Faust undergoing just the sort of niche-migration or segment transition that Millgram highlights. Faust's situation is made most explicit in the famous scene "Outside the Town Walls", in his speech on his "two souls" (*FPO*: 35-36). The curse that Faust goes on to pronounce against more or less every pursuit or concern that human beings have felt to be worthwhile (in the second scene set in Faust's study) can be read as the repudiation of the policies, intentions, and ground projects that had previously guided him (*FPO*: 49). Indeed, this much seems implied by the chorus of spirits' exhortation to create an entirely new world *within himself*.

Mephistopheles, to Faust's disappointment, suggests that Faust can only ever be the man he already is. But, as already suggested, there are other strong indications in the play that Faust isn't really *anybody*, or that he isn't any longer who he once was, and he hasn't figured out who he will become, other than someone committed to a fairly contentless program of just *acting* ("In the beginning was the Deed!"). The multiple identities adopted by Mephistopheles throughout the drama also provide a model of a disunified agency. In an interesting parallel with the other characters previously discussed, hints of insincerity, of some kind of alienation from life, begin to appear in later scenes, as in the male ape's song about the globe in "A Witch's Kitchen" (*FPO*: 74). The potion that Faust consumes makes it impossible for Gretchen to see who he is; that is, there is necessarily going to be some sort of distance between them, some sort of gap between who Faust is and how he appears to Gretchen. In "A Garden", we see the fruits of Faust's divided self in his plainly insincere speech to Gretchen; this insincerity is only deepened in the later scene in "Martha's Garden", in which Faust tries to assuage Gretchen's uneasiness about his apparent apostasy (*FPO*: 97-98; 108-109).

The point I made above (about the near impossibility of boiling down a literary work to a tidy philosophical point) applies in spades to Goethe's *Faust*, a work that itself underwent many transformations during radically different segments of its author's own life. Still, it strikes me that at least part of what is

[18] Goethe 2008: p. 11. Hereafter cited *FPO* with accompanying page(s).

going on is the dramatization of a Millgramian niche-migration in which the capacity of human beings to undertake such migrations is being celebrated while also being cast in a tragic light. Is Faust's cheeky revision of the Prologue of John, "In the beginning was the Deed!" meant to be something like a *policy* for navigating between niches? Perhaps it suggests instead a recognition on Goethe's part that there is simply nothing on hand that allows us to evaluate the moments in which we are most of all agents.

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