

On Authenticity: A DeGrazian Outlook of Birdman or (An Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)

The following is a lens essay for an English course. The chosen target text is Alejandro González Iñárritu's Birdman or (An Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) and the assigned lens text is George Washington University philosophy professor, David DeGrazia's Prozac, Enhancement and Self Creation. I would like to take a moment to note that at the time of this writing, nearly half a decade after its initial release, the target text is one that remains wildly debated as it is open to many interpretations. In the film, as the protagonist descends into delusion, the lines between reality and fantasy become distorted, leaving the viewer to insert a sense of meaning for herself. The interpretations found in this essay have been carefully chosen to strengthen those arguments of the lens text and do not necessarily represent my own personal beliefs. Finally, the use of symbolic logic (SL) is utilized throughout to help better support these arguments. While the validity of these logic sentences is bona fide, the same cannot be said about its soundness.

“There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written.”
-Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray

“The unexamined life is not worth living,” according to Socrates; it is the purpose of human existence itself to unlock its ethereal wonders and attain a sense of eudemonia. The semantics and methodologies related to the execution of such ideation, however, has been the topic of concern for centuries. In order to begin unpacking this notion, it is necessary to be cognizant of the essence of the human, namely: human authenticity. One can find the seeds of this authenticity beyond the firing of millions of neurons (the physical human body) in the mind, where the id meets the superego, resulting in a fantastic battle which yields none other than the ego. Be it as it may, one cannot begin to discuss metaphysical implications of identity without formally putting to rest qualms made by Leibnizians in the name of the Identity of Indiscernibles¹. While the consequences of The Identity ought to be incorporated in any thorough understanding of human identity, it is doubly important to emphasize the underlying tone of

¹ The ontological principle that states that there cannot be separate objects or entities that have all their properties in common, a significant postulate in the discussion of identity theory.

persistence necessary for the comparative in question. It is this tone that will serve as the foundation for discussion and analysis. Moreover, it follows that human identity (E_1) either with or without the Identity of Indiscernibles ($\sim E_2$) must have at least some element of continuity (E_3) independent of its proclivity (E_1 ; $((E_1 \wedge E_2) \vee (E_1 \wedge \sim E_2)) \supset E_3 \rightarrow E_3$), and that with some amount of continuity, it can be concluded that there exists a level of persistence (E_4) within, regardless of this antithetical school of thought ($E_3 \equiv E_4$). Interestingly, the characteristics of this persistence related to personal human identity resembles the inner mechanisms of atoms, the building blocks of the known universe: atoms may gain or lose valiance electrons and may exist as isotopes, however, despite potential idiosyncrasies, the essence of the atom (its atomic number) nevertheless remains the sum of its protons. This perspective should be well received as it does not fail to acknowledge those concerns amongst subscribers of a Pattern Theory concerning identity.

Affirming this notion of persistence related to human identity, it is important to have a proper measuring scale to discern authenticity. For this, one can turn to the like of Albert Camus and other absurdist/existentialists as well as humanists to find that the measure of authenticity exists solely within one's self. Who better to judge the nature of authenticity than the subject himself? One can rest assured that the power to create significance in a seemingly nugatory world lies from within. Indeed, there may be no godly heaven waiting above as death strikes its dark hour, but instead, one has the power to create heaven right here on earth by fulfilling a sense of self purpose and satisfaction. Perhaps no single person represents this 21st century western philosophy better than that of George Washington University humanities professor, David DeGrazia. In his writings, DeGrazia buttresses these claims by postulating that one can satisfy his inner authenticity by adhering to self-constructionism (DeGrazia). Additionally, perhaps

there is no better application of this ideology than Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2014 film, *Birdman or (An Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. The later will serve as a consequential case study related to the aforementioned arguments, ultimately acting as a microcosm for the underlying, quintessentially DeGrazian philosophy. The film showcases the life of Riggan Thomson, a washed up, fifty-year-old actor who is fixated on the notion of trying to recreate a name for himself. While on the surface it appears Riggan lives a life consumed of inauthenticity, narcissism, and identity stagnation, a closer look will instead reveal that this proves to be an ineffective outlook on the ossified identity, on man who was Birdman.

Followed by the alter-ego who is his former, famous self, Riggan tries desperately to produce a Broadway play he believes will once again make him a household name. Intoxicated by his need for fame, the protagonist obsesses about the disharmony that exists between the man he wants to return to and the man he sees in the mirror; "Oh, look at me! Look at this! I look like a turkey with leukemia. I'm f*cking disappearing" (Iñárritu). The extent Riggan is willing to go in order to secure his fame is arguably one that is self-destructive: he impairs the relationship he has with his daughter (someone who grows up resenting Riggan), destroys his marriage, and strategically hospitalizes one of his actors he deems unworthy of performing. Do these actions cause a moral dilemma when dealing with self-authenticity? It may appear that these doings may be objectively immoral, however, it is necessary to dive deep within the protagonist's mind frame in order to get to the roots of where such issues are present. It is only then can the unaltered self be stared right in the face and gauged for authenticity.

To Riggan, the play he is creating is the object of his affection, a means for self-creation, the person he ultimately wants to become. By denying Riggan the moral credence to carry on with his production is to deny him his right to live. As DeGrazia explains, "life is a project

...”(36), and this project unambiguously happens to be the production of a play he is trying to create. This idea is furthered when Riggan unintentionally causes chaotic disruption while walking down a busy New York City street. Mistaken for what she believes is the filming of a Hollywood production, a woman asks, “Are you guys making a movie?”, to which Riggan pauses, renders, and responds, “Yeah, uhh...this is for a movie” (Iñárritu). This dialogue brings forward the notion that to Riggan, the desire to achieve the level of success he put out for himself is visceral: his life and his productions are one and the same, woven together by an everlasting, unbreakable bond. Iñárritu even goes as far as styling the movie in its entirety as one continuous, theatrical camera shot. The indiscrete nature of the movie made possible by the lack of discernible scenes allows Riggan to become part of the production itself ($R \equiv P$). While it may appear that Riggan’s inauthenticity stems from his obsession to produce the play at any means, this is clearly a biased view. Stuck onto the mirror of Riggan’s wardrobe is a card that reads, “A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing” (Iñárritu). To fully understand Riggan’s authenticity, it is necessary to see the play not through the subjective eyes of the audience, but rather from the point of view of Riggan himself. To the protagonist, the production transcends any play itself and instead signifies his greater purpose of life, his self-conception.

It has been clearly demonstrated the heavy weight of the production that is attached to Riggan’s identity; however, is this *necessarily* indicative of authenticity? While this alone is not a sufficient condition to conclude authenticity, such instances behave as a vessel for allowing authenticity to prosper. To fully comprehend the magnitude of this phenomena, it is helpful to investigate the reoccurring theme that magic plays in the movie. As the protagonist descends into madness, he is seen engaging in acts of sorcery. In the beginning of the film, a peaceful Riggan is seen levitating while an irate Riggan once again has his powers reemerge as he releases a

forceful demolition of his room. This pattern continues, emerging during times of blissful rapture as well as rage. It is all too likely that these powers are to be interpretations, intentional leakages of raw authenticity. When the production is affected, in any regard, Riggan's powers are not far. Not only is Riggan's persona emotionally intertwined with the play, but also the essence of his authentic self is directly invested too; "who we are has everything to do with what we value" (DeGrazia). Such values are put to the test when Riggan decides to shoot himself onstage during the final scene of his play in order to reach the artistic success he dreamed of. Surviving the shot, it is at this pivotal moment where Riggan attains self-actualization, represented by the final moment in the movie where Riggan takes off from a window and seemingly flies with the birds. While the audience is left unsure whether Riggan indeed begins to fly or instead fall to his death, it is certain that Riggan is free from the ball-and-chains he has spent his life ceaselessly dragging down on under him.

Indeed, the center fails to hold any longer, anarchy is inevitably loosened upon the world, and everything falls apart, however, for Riggan, the destruction of his former self has allowed him to complete the transformation into the person he longed to become: Birdman. As he presumably flies off into the distance, above the city street and above the people he worked so hard to impress, the final transformation alludes to the exchange that occurred at the opening of the film:

And did you get everything you wanted from life?
 I did.
 And what did you want?
 To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.

(Iñárritu). Through the journey of Birdman, there is a gradual, genuine shift in attitude from the audience, taken from misunderstanding, pity and shame to understanding, honor, and tranquility. On the surface, a man whose vanity seems to have gotten to the better of him is now understood

to be, in a way, imperfectly human. While the protagonist's apparent desires were likely inconsistent with most of the audience's, this alone does not make them any less real or ethical. Asked what specifically her father did to toxify their relationship, Riggan's daughter found herself unable to explicitly point to any incidents of wrong doing. While the id of one's consciousness may prevail in corrupting our inner self, personal and visceral understanding of apparent vices must come from within; "one has to discover and be true to oneself in order to live an authentic life" (DeGrazia) . It is only then can one begin to satisfy the temptations of their inner authenticity, and anything else, drawn by the conclusions of anyone else is blatantly unauthentic. This and only this is the examined life.

Works Cited

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DeGrazia, David. "Prozac, Enhancement, and Self-Creation." (2000).

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