TOWARDS AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS.
AUTHENTICITY IN THE
PATIENT-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the significance of the existential notion of authenticity for medical ethics. This is done by analyzing authenticity and examining its implications for the patient-professional relationship and for ethical decision-making in medical situations. It is argued that while authenticity implies important demand for individual responsibility, which has therapeutic significance, it perpetuates ideas which are antithetical both to authentic interaction between patients and professionals and to fruitful deliberation of moral dilemmas. In order to counteract these consequences, an alternative idea of authenticity is introduced. According to this idea, authenticity is not regarded primarily as individual sovereignty, but as an ability to participate in a dialogue in which the subjectivity of both partners is respected. Such practice, based on mutual trust and responsibility, would enhance common decision-making and overcome the alienation between patients and professionals.

Key words: Authenticity, conversations, medical decision-making, patient-professional relationship, respect for persons

1. INTRODUCTION

"Patient autonomy" is a popular slogan these days. In medical ethics this idea has usually been explicated in terms of liberal theories of individual freedom. But there are other theories of freedom that are worth considering in this context. The most radical doctrine of individual freedom in the history of philosophy can be found in existentialist writings. In this paper I examine whether the existential notion of authenticity has any significance for our understanding of the patient-professional relationship and medical decision-making. In the first part I briefly describe the main characteristics of authenticity, especially as it appears in the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. In the second part I evaluate three models of patient-professional interaction in light of the notion of authenticity. In the third part I consider the implications of existential authenticity for moral decision-making in health care. I argue that the existentialist version of authenticity is far too demanding, monological and individualistic to be suitable in the context of health care. The demand for radical individual
self-governance must be rejected in favor of a dialogical interaction between persons who engage in "authentic conversations."

2. THE EXISTENTIALIST NOTION OF AUTHENTICITY

In his book, *Existentialism*, John MacQuarrie writes:

Existence is authentic to the extent that the existent has taken possession of himself and, shall we say, has moulded himself in his own image. Inauthentic existence, on the other hand, is moulded by external influences, whether these be circumstances, moral codes, political or ecclesiastical authorities, or whatever.1

According to MacQuarrie's words, authenticity really is personal freedom in the sense of radical self-governance.2 This freedom of the existential subject consists in a dynamic process of creating oneself. We do not become free by escaping all "natural effects" and by subjecting the passions to the rule of reason. Rather than excluding or repressing part of ourselves, we can fully be ourselves only by assuming the totality of our being. The existential subject takes hold of him- or herself and becomes *authentic* by assuming responsibility for his or her entire life. It is essential to the existential conception of human existence that the individual accepts the responsibility placed upon him/her as a free human being.

In existentialism the individual's *choice* is of pivotal significance for all ethical considerations. This choice is not characterized in terms of intellectual deliberation between objectively presented possibilities, but rather as the way in which the individual realizes possible modes of existence. Existentialism regards it as a unique characteristic of human existence that one never passively undergoes one's condition; one lives in an active way and projects one's life on the basis of the concrete situation. In the course of this activity, one gives meaning to one's world, which has no significance independently of this process. Rather than being imposed upon human agents, all standards of behavior and models of life arise, therefore, within the structure of interpretations created by human activity. Historically speaking, the center of emphasis is thus transferred from the universality of which the individual is only an instance to the individuality through which everything takes on meaning and significance.

From the ethical perspective, this meaning-giving activity is best described in terms of the relationship between freedom and values. One of the most common examples of inauthenticity, or "bad faith" (*mauvaise foi*) as Sartre calls it, is to see our situation as endowed with ethical meaning independently of our choice. To use Sartre's terminology we tend to see meanings and values as a part of our "facticity" rather than as belonging