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The Existential Philosophy of David Foster Wallace

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Philosophy

Bridgewater State University

May 12, 2020

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Reference Key

BI: *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

BN: *Being and Nothingness*

DP: “The Depressed Person”

EE: *Essays in Existentialism*

EI: *Existentialism: An Introduction*

EH: *Existentialism as a Humanism*

NE: “No Exit”

OB: *Oblivion*

SE: *Situating Existentialism*

TIW: “This is Water”

Introduction

It is no secret that philosophy and literature are often closely intertwined: beginning with works as old as Plato's dialogues, philosophers have always seen the merit in utilizing fiction to share philosophy with both their contemporaries and with the general public. The most prominent existentialists are perhaps the most famous for using literature as a vehicle for their philosophical ideas: Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre all published some kind of fiction, through parables, novels, plays, and so forth. Likewise, I will argue in this thesis that renowned writer David Foster Wallace was not only a writer—though his career choice reflects his status as an author, the works he produced reflect his status as a philosopher.

It is certainly no stretch to read Wallace's work through a philosophical lens, as he double-majored in English and Philosophy during his undergraduate career, and completed a now-famous undergraduate thesis in philosophy.¹ Furthermore, although he obtained an MFA in creative writing following his undergraduate degree, Wallace went on to attend Harvard with the intention of earning a Ph.D. in philosophy. Though he left Harvard after a single semester to enter a treatment program for alcoholism and depression, Wallace's time with philosophy was never finished. In addition to his undergraduate work, Wallace immersed himself in the philosophical sphere through his fiction and nonfiction writing. Though his fiction and

¹ Wallace's thesis, "Richard Taylor's Fatalism and the Semantics of Physical Modality," posthumously published as *Fate, Time, and Language: An Essay on Free Will*, is a work in analytic philosophy whereby Wallace critiques Taylor's method for justifying his view of fatalism. While this thesis is not a foray into existentialism, it is clear that Wallace has in-depth experience with philosophical analysis and argumentation especially in regard to issues of free will.

nonfiction often focuses on or alludes to issues of analytic philosophy², Wallace presents and addresses the existential concepts of bad faith, the Other, and authenticity across his fiction. Indeed, it is almost always the case that Wallace's characters find themselves on the border of bad faith and anguish, and often struggle with depression or self-doubt, just as the author himself did in his life.

As Wallace's writing is so often focused on these kinds of struggles, and as his own similar struggles eventually led to his suicide, his work is often misread as wholly pessimistic. It is no coincidence that these faulty interpretations of Wallace's work run parallel to the classic misinterpretation of existentialism, which many wrongly assumed to be a dark, dreary, and hopeless kind of philosophy. I contend that just as existentialism is actually a much more positive philosophy than many once thought (as it culminates in authenticity, which is an undeniably positive outcome), so too does Wallace's writing hold a more positive outlook than might be apparent at first glance.

Indeed, although Wallace eventually succumbed to his depression, I maintain that his philosophy itself is far from depressive, and in many ways offers an even more hopeful existential stance than those existentialists who preceded Wallace. Here, I will show that Wallace demonstrates existential philosophy—especially Sartrean existentialism— while also building on the concepts he addresses in at least two ways. First, he develops characters that are immersed in existential questions, face existential dilemmas, and exude existential attributes. Importantly, I will emphasize that many of Wallace's characters display a deeper existential complexity than

² Wallace includes symbolic logic statements in several of his fiction stories. He also focuses on issues within philosophy of language: in his fiction, he addresses the problem of words and meaning; in his nonfiction, he writes on Wittgenstein and other philosophers within the field.

more simplistic, or linear, or ‘black and white’ characters from other existential works (such as Sartre’s “No Exit”). Second, and resultantly, I will argue that Wallace’s existentially complex characters reflect a deeper complexity and philosophical considerations of some of the original Sartrean-existentialist ideas, especially the ideas of bad faith, the Other, and authenticity. In offering this nuanced and contemporary perspective of existential issues through deeply complex characters, then, Wallace not only manages to engage with and exemplify existentialism in his work, but also significantly adds to it. Thus, in this thesis I will argue that Wallace’s fiction builds on existential philosophy by depicting the struggles of individuals fighting against bad faith or striving for authenticity in order to emphasize the enormous difficulty in, but ultimate worthiness of, pursuing such goals.

To develop this argument, I will begin in chapter one by reviewing some of the main themes of Sartrean-existentialism, including the three modes of being, bad faith, anguish, the Other, the Look, and authenticity. With these existential themes in mind, in chapter two I will analyze three of Wallace’s short stories: “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XI),” “The Depressed Person,” and “Good Old Neon.” In this analysis, I will show that while “Borders” provides a survey of these existential themes, the latter two works demonstrate a nuanced account of bad faith and the Other. In chapter three, I will argue that Wallace’s account of bad faith doesn’t necessarily serve as his conclusion for human existence; rather, I will show that he points towards the possibility of moving towards authenticity in terms of the everyday, rather than on a grand scale. Finally, and as an underlying goal throughout this thesis, I will establish that the use of literature as a vehicle for philosophy must not be understated going forward, as works like Wallace’s prove the significant philosophical growth that can come from the use of such a medium.

Chapter One

Through the Keyhole: Existential Themes

I will focus on a primarily Sartrean account of existentialism in this thesis, but to do so, I must first address the difficulties in defining the philosophical tradition of existentialism itself. Existentialism is a difficult term in at least two ways. First, it is a term that is elusive in nature, as it is difficult to definitively encapsulate. Contrary to a view such as empiricism or realism, existentialism is a philosophical concept, position or ‘school’ that doesn’t readily fall into a clear philosophical definition. Second, this elusive nature is exacerbated by the fact that many philosophers who were considered ‘existentialists’ rejected the label altogether.³ Indeed, part of the difficulty in defining existentialism as definitive or singular in its views can be found in its timeframe: as Jonathan Judaken points out in the introduction to his *Situating Existentialism*, “the process of establishing existentialism as a distinctive brand of theorizing about the human predicament in modernity was only welded together in hindsight” (SE 1), calling philosophers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard back from the grave to join the ranks of the reluctantly-named existentialists. Furthermore, “the writers grouped together as existentialists offer no coherent creed or body of thought or doctrine...in fact, among those thinkers generally lumped together and labeled ‘existentialists’ there are profound differences on foundational issues” regarding anything from religion, to politics, to ethical outlooks (SE 2); some of the most

³ Historically, Gabriel Marcel coined the term, not for himself, but for Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir (but both initially rejected it). Similarly, the term was eventually applied to Marcel, as well as Albert Camus, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others. All of them distanced themselves from the label. Ultimately, Sartre and de Beauvoir came to embrace the term and identify themselves as existentialists.

famous existentialists (regardless of whether they accepted such a title) were staunch atheists, while others were devout believers in a monotheistic God.⁴

Yet, Kevin Aho asserts in his *Existentialism: An Introduction*, despite “these conflicting views, there are clear indications of a new philosophical orientation emerging in modern Europe, centering specifically on the question of what it means *to be* human” (EI x). Likewise, Aho says, “although [existentialism] cannot be reduced to a unified school of thought...the common thread that ties these thinkers together is their concern for the human situation *as it is lived*” (EI X). Thus, while it is impossible to successfully define existentialism as a unified philosophical viewpoint, it is nevertheless possible to introduce existentialism through a cluster of interrelated themes that most ‘existentialists’ develop in their writings, which, as Aho notes, begins with their conception of ‘being.’

§1: Three Beings

In a broad sense, then, existentialism is concerned with questions of human existence, and necessarily begins with the individual. To begin, existentialism outlines three ‘modes of being’ that constitute the idea of being human: (1) *being-in-question*; (2) *being-as-becoming*; (3) and *being-in-time*. First, existentialists suggest that human beings are unique, or different than other beings insofar as our being is a *being-in-question*. Human beings have the capacity for self-awareness and self-reflection, a capacity that is integral to the human condition. We are the only beings which *can* question our very existence. At any given moment in our lives, we can pause to reflect upon what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. This can range from potentially minor questions (“Why am I having coffee for breakfast?”) to more significant questions about our

⁴ For instance, Nietzsche, Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus belong to the former camp; Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Marcel belong to the latter.

individual existence (“Should I really choose to study philosophy?”; “What are the goals in my life over the next ten years, and why?”; etc.). Resultantly, humans are the only beings that are literally self-aware, meaning we are constantly aware of ourselves as individuals.⁵

Second, existentialism asserts that humans are *being-as-becoming* in that we are constantly making choices, and all of those choices result in the perpetual redefining of one’s self, or one’s essence. Here, it becomes important to understand what the existentialist means by *essence*. One’s essence is one’s diachronically defining traits—one’s form, structure, and function; that which defines a thing. In his essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Sartre suggests this mode of being when he introduces the distinction between “essence precedes existence” and “existence precedes essence”.

For those who hold that “essence precedes existence,” it is argued that a thing’s essence is defined prior to its creation. With this belief, one’s essence is effectively predetermined and unchanging, and therefore directly defines the course of one’s existence. Sartre suggests that this idea applies for non-humans (e.g. technology) and introduces the example of a paper knife to illustrate. For the paper knife, essence precedes existence: the fundamental purpose of the knife is predetermined based on its essential features. It is designed with a specific function or *telos*—namely to cut open folded paper. Even though you could perhaps use it for other ends—such as slicing bread—its essence, or what constitutes the item *qua* paper knife, is its specific function to

⁵ The French philosopher, Albert Camus, finds our being-in-question to be so significant, that, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he famously asserts that the most important philosophical question is whether one should commit suicide. After all, Camus asks, if there is no meaning to life, and if one knows that there is no meaning in life, what could possibly be the point of living at all? As it turns out, Camus’ question has a rather positive answer: so long as the individual lives life well, a meaningless life can still be very much ‘worth’ living. Of course, there is no manual that explains exactly what ‘living life well’ entails, especially when considering the variations between each existentialist’s own philosophy. Still, the most famous existentialists each offer their own take on the matter of ‘living life well,’ and each of those philosophies come down to one, basic point: the individual.

cut open folded paper. The essence of the paper knife precedes its existence in that it does not come into being and subsequently get assigned a purpose or slowly develop its own path. Rather, its essence depends on its predetermined form, structure, design, purpose, and so on. Thus, a paper knife *is* a paper knife, not in a tautological sense per se, but in that a paper knife is and always will *be* a paper knife.

Now, Sartre maintains that a fundamental existential claim is that the human being embodies the opposite: their existence precedes essence. Here, he argues that a human's essence is necessarily open-ended and ever-changing. Rather than accept that a person can 'be' X thing solely by virtue of having been born, existentialists propose that the individual is necessarily a thing that is always 'becoming and can never 'be,' hence their designation of humans as being-as-becoming. Take the example of a waiter. For Sartre, a waiter is unable to literally 'be' a waiter, in that the man who waits on customers at a café is obviously more than just 'the man who waits on customers at a café.' Indeed, that man is no more 'a waiter' than he is 'a breather' (a person that breathes); his essence has the potential to be infinitely more variable than the fixed essence of a paper knife, as a human's essence depends on one's existence. According to Sartre, then, "man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life" (EH 37). In other words, an individual's essence is constantly changing, constantly 'becoming,' as one's essence is dependent only on the actions one chooses to take throughout one's existence.

To understand *why* humans are being-as-becoming, it is imperative to note our status as free agents, as the specific causal relationship between existence and essence occurs as a result of human freedom. Briefly, all humans have agency, which gives us the ability to make our own choices. We can choose whether to act or not act, and can also choose how we will relate to any

given circumstance. As human agents always have this basic agency, and as each action one takes as an agent always affects one's essence, it is necessarily the case that the human essence can never be, but is always becoming.

Sartre contends, however, that this freedom entails serious consequences: "if it is true that existence precedes essence, we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature," but must instead explain them through the lens of our own individual choices (EH 29). Without a 'human nature' to call on as an excuse for one's actions, then, Sartre famously argues that a human is "condemned to be free: condemned, because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (EH 29). Despite the rather ominous nature of this statement, Sartre's point here is purely logical: freedom necessarily entails responsibility. To put it simply, if humans always have agency, then any action one does or does not take is an action one has specifically chosen to take or not take. If one's choices are the only determinates of one's actions, then an agent must be held responsible for said actions, thereby condemning all human agents to the extreme weight of responsibility solely as a result of their freedom.

Finally, existentialism maintains a third mode of being, called *being-in-time*. That is, we see ourselves as temporal beings in that we have the ability to reflect upon ourselves as a being with a past, a future-oriented being, or a being in the present. As an individual cannot literally change their past actions, Sartre calls the individual's past one's *facticity*. Although one's agency does not extend to one's facticity in a physical sense (in that one cannot literally change one's past actions), the individual retains a particular kind of freedom in their ability to take their own view of past events. Resultantly, even those actions we have taken in the past do not have a single, permanently set effect on our identities, as it is one's interpretation of or relationship with

the events of one's facticity, rather than the events themselves, that determines the continual effects of those events on one's essence. As previously mentioned, the individual has the freedom to make choices in the present, and must be responsible for the effects of those choices as a result of that freedom.

Unlike our past, the events of our future are not literally set in stone; in fact, they are not set at all, they are comprised wholly of a 'nothingness.' As the events of the future have yet to occur, they are referred to by Sartre as our *transcendence*, which is that part of our essence which is not yet. Indeed, while we have no way of knowing exactly what our future holds, that lack of knowledge does not change the fact that one's self is affected by one's perception of one's potential future. As humans look forward to certain goals, we define ourselves by events that have not yet occurred—for instance, a student studying business might define themselves by earning a degree, in that they see themselves as 'being a future graduate.'

Importantly, our freedom extends in different ways to each of these temporalities, as we are free to literally choose our present actions, and are free to choose the relationship we have to the events of our facticity and to the potential events of our transcendence. Take a simple example: a spoiled child is never taught to do any household chores, and eventually grows up and moves into his own apartment. He lives like a slob, eats only fast food, never does his dishes or his laundry, and so on. When this lifestyle inevitably leads to a variety of negative consequences, the man becomes miserable. He insists that his misery is his parents' fault, as they never taught him how to do things for himself; likewise, he argues that (due to his stench, increasing weight, etc.), unless someone does these chores for him, he will never get a job or succeed in life. Although he is correct that his parents never taught him to do these things, however, he is incorrect in his insistence that his parents are at fault for his *present* and *future*

living conditions. Indeed, Sartre would advise the man that, though the events of his facticity are cemented, it is his choice to decide how he will view those past events, and how he will view the events of his present and transcendence. For example, he could continue to blame his parents, thereby shirking responsibility for his present and future, or he could take responsibility for his facticity, learn from it, and choose to take action in the present by learning to keep himself and his home clean so he can eventually succeed, in which he defines himself by his transcendence. Once again, this freedom necessarily leads to total responsibility, regardless of whether the actions being considered occurred in the past, are happening in the present, or will occur in the future.

§2: Anguish, Bad Faith, and The Other

Having established the three modes of being commonly identified in existentialism, it becomes relevant for our analysis of existential themes in Wallace's works to examine three Sartrean concepts that encapsulate the typical, but self-negating, reaction to the freedom and responsibility that follows from 'being human'. Specifically, Sartre introduces the concepts of *anguish*, *bad faith*, and *the Other*.

As the individual comes to truly process the relationship between their freedom and the continual reformation of their essence, the weight of responsibility often becomes too heavy to bear. For Sartre, the revelation that the individual is wholly and irrevocably responsible for their actions—and therefore their essence— leads to *anguish*. Anguish is the feeling one gets after realizing that we are truly “condemned to be free.”⁶ This newly understood dynamic heightens

⁶ At this point, one realizes that each action one takes not only reflects on one's own self, but on humanity as a whole (because we must choose to take X action, and for a person to take X action means asserting that it would be acceptable for all of humanity to take X action).

one's sense of responsibility further than ever before, thus prompting a heavy sense of anguish in the individual as they contemplate whether each action they have taken or will take was or is the 'right' action.

Sartre emphasizes the importance of fully explicating the difference between anguish and fear. To display this difference, Sartre offers the example of a man who experiences vertigo while walking on narrow path that goes along a precipice (EE 121). In this situation, a man who experiences vertigo because he worries the ground will slip and cause him to fall feels fear, while a man whose vertigo stems from the knowledge that he is responsible for either falling or not falling feels anguish.

As displayed in the case of vertigo, the difference between anguish and fear can be found in the source of the concern: Specifically, fear has an external object as the cause of concern, while anguish has an internal object (one's self) as the cause of concern. As Sartre puts it, "a situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation" (EE 120). Anguish, then, is the result of understanding the true weight of responsibility, of knowing that the individual is responsible for their actions in every case, regardless of the circumstances of the external world. Sartre refers to the kind of anguish displayed in his vertigo example as "anguish in the face of the future," as the anguish represented in that case is founded upon the concern the individual has for his *possible* actions, the possibilities he *will be* responsible for choosing or avoiding (EE 125).

This, of course, means that there is another kind of anguish, which Sartre calls "anguish in the face of the past" (EE 125). Here, Sartre gives the example of a gambler who has recently resolved to quit gambling. The gambler has "freely and sincerely decided not to gamble any

more,” but, upon approaching the gaming table “suddenly sees all his resolutions melt away” (EE 125). In this moment, the gambler clearly remembers what it was like to make his resolution: he remembers the reasons why he chose to quit gambling, as well as the determination he felt in making such a choice. Despite those memories, the gambler finds that the resolve of his facticity has not extended to his present, and therefore enters a state of anguish upon realizing that his resolution to quit gambling lasts only as long as the moment in which he makes that resolution. In other words, the gambler feels anguish upon realizing that he must apprehend his desire to gamble not just in one moment, but every time he sees the gaming table. Thus, the gambler’s anguish can be traced from his continual responsibility for his present choices in the face of his facticity.

As anguish results from the horror of realizing the significance and weight of one’s responsibility, existentialism suggests that the easiest way to escape anguish is to avoid responsibility. While it is impossible to *actually* avoid responsibility—as our freedom entails our responsibility, and as Sartre says, we are “condemned to be free”—it remains entirely possible to *attempt* to circumvent responsibility: to do so, one must simply deny one’s freedom in the first place. Sartre defines this denial of freedom as it is employed on an individualistic scale as *bad faith*. As alluded to above, bad faith begins with the denial of one’s freedom of choice, which axiomatically allows for the denial of one’s responsibility. Importantly, the ‘denial of’ one’s freedom does not mean that one is no longer free to make choices; rather, it refers to a particular kind of deception in which one convinces oneself that they are not free, and that they are therefore not responsible for their actions.

While deception is the mechanism which allows for the existence of bad faith, however, bad faith must be distinguished from lying, which is the most common kind of deception. Put

simply, “the essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding,” and therefore must be lying with the intent to deceive (EE 148).

Thus, a true ‘liar’ is someone who, “affirming the truth within himself,” goes on to deny it “in his words” (EE 149). Likewise, the ideal form of the liar lies *to the other*, not to himself.

Conversely, one who acts in bad faith cannot be considered a true ‘liar’ in the prescribed sense of the word: as Sartre says, though bad faith “has in appearance the structure of falsehood,” it is fundamentally different from lying in that “in bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth” (EE 150). Here, Sartre argues that ‘lies’ of bad faith are not the same as the lies a real liar tells, as the latter refers to lies told purposefully to deceive others, while the former primarily results in the deception of oneself. Additionally, bad faith lacks the “duality of the deceiver and the deceived,” as it takes place within one, unified consciousness (EE 150). The above necessitates that the ‘deceiver’ aspect of oneself knows the complete truth, as that is necessary for one to properly hide the truth from the ‘deceived’ aspect of oneself. These must occur simultaneously, as bad faith occurs in a unified consciousness, *not* in a dual-party system.

Thus, one who is acting in bad faith must genuinely convince themselves that they cannot and could not ever act in a way other than the way in which they have acted (or are acting, or will act). By successfully deceiving oneself in this way, one thinks oneself free of responsibility in the past, present, and future—after all, a person living in bad faith has convinced themselves that their actions are perfectly acceptable in every case, either because they believe that a ‘better’ action simply wasn’t available, or because they’ve deluded themselves into believing that the action they chose was in fact the best action. In this respect, bad faith enables the individual to (falsely) believe that they are not being-in-time or being-as-becoming, as one in bad faith believes their essence to be outside of their responsibility. To exemplify this concept, we may

return to the example of the spoiled man provided at the end of section one of this chapter.

Assuming that the man continues to live as a slob, and assuming that he persists in his insistence that he “wants” to change but “cannot” due to his parents’ actions, then he is denying the possibility of self-change. By denying that it is possible for him to change, he is denying responsibility for his facticity, his present, and his transcendence, thereby placing himself in bad faith.

According to Sartre, our anguish and predilection to live in bad faith is further exacerbated by another challenge: the existence of other human beings, or what Sartre refers to as *the Other*. For Sartre, other human beings serve as an impediment to our freedom and responsibility as human relationships are characterized by a ‘subject-object’ dichotomy. Both parties struggle to become the active subject and thereby relegate the other person to an object, defined by the subject. Thus, not only do we, as individuals, often shirk our responsibilities and undermine our own freedom (thereby shunning the idea that our “existence precedes essence”), the presence of the Other further heightens this existential crisis insofar as other people are trying to deprive us of our freedom through what Sartre refers to as ‘the Look.’

Simply put, the Look occurs when the individual is seen by the Other, and is therefore made an object for that subject (the Other) to perceive and define. Thus, while the individual’s essence is necessarily in flux from a subjective standpoint (i.e. from their own perspective), the Other’s objectification of the individual fixes their essence into that which is singular and externally defined. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces the now famous example of the keyhole to demonstrate the Look. Here, we are to imagine a man, “moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice” who peers through a door’s keyhole to spy on the goings-on in the room behind that door. As he does so alone, without an Other to externally objectify (i.e. define) the man’s self,

“there is no self to inhabit by consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them” (BN 259). To be conscious of his self, there must necessarily be an Other present *from which* the man would be objectively defined; without the presence of an Other, “I am a pure consciousness of things, and things, caught up in the circuit of my selfness, offer to me their potentialities as the proof of my non-thetic consciousness of my own possibilities” (BN 259). Though there were, are, and will be other possibilities available, without the eyes of the Other, there seems to be no reason to consider why one would ever choose different actions. Though one’s perception and interpretation of reality and the choices that necessarily come with it are inherently subjective, from one’s necessarily internal standpoint (in the case that one is alone), it appears as though whatever choices one makes are objectively the obvious choices to be making.

Rather than a fixed ‘self’ that is perpetually being created by one’s choices, then, the man simply *is* his acts, “and my acts are commanded only by the ends to be attained and the instruments to be employed,” wherein the instrument is “the keyhole,” and the end is “the spectacle to be seen” (BN 259). Thus, “the end justifies the means; the means do not exist for themselves and outside the end,” (BN 259) as without the end (here, seeing the ‘sight to be seen’ on the other side of the door), there are no means, as a keyhole is only the ‘means’ for seeing a sight to be seen *if there is a sight to be seen*. Since his “jealousy, curiosity, or vice” (BN 259) makes the situation on the other side of the door ‘a sight to be seen,’ the end does, in the state of aloneness described above, justify the means. In this moment, the man is nothing more than his actions, and so appears to be freely defining himself through the actions he’s undertaking.

From here, Sartre introduces the challenge of the Other as he proposes that “all of a sudden...someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected

in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure” of nothingness inspired by simple, previously ‘objective’ means and ends (BN 260). These modifications can only be addressed “by means of the reflective *cogito*,” as only the reflective *cogito* can view the self in-itself (BN 260). In this new, Other-present system, the unreflective consciousness of the spying man can no longer account for a nothingness of self, as “here the self comes to haunt the unreflective consciousness. Now the unreflective consciousness is consciousness of the world. Therefore for the unreflective consciousness the self exists on the level of objects in the world” (BN 260). Thus, where the reflective consciousness has the self as an object in itself, the unreflective consciousness, when one is seen in the eyes of the other, is presented with the self “*in so far as the person is an object for the other*” (BN 260). This creates a system in which “it is shame or pride which reveals me to the Other’s look and myself at the end of that look. It is the shame or pride which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at” (BN 261). In this system, then, one’s shame “is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging...Beyond any knowledge which I can have, I am this self which another knows” (BN 261). Importantly, the Other is able to do what one cannot do within one’s own consciousness: objectify, determine, and fix one’s self to *be* this or that thing. Indeed, “the Other has to make my being-for-him *be* in so far as he has to be his being,” meaning that the objectification of (one’s own) self by the Other is a necessary and inescapable aspect of the Other’s being. Resultantly, “if there is an Other, whatever or whoever he may be, whatever may be his relations with me, and without his acting upon me in any way except by the pure upsurge of his being—then I have an outside, I have a nature” (BN 263). The Other, as Sartre presents them, is an inescapable force through which an externally perceived version of one’s self can be *known*, prompting an internal frustration due to the fact that one cannot know one’s own self.

Furthermore, “[t]he look does not carve me out in the universe; it comes to search for me at the heart of my situation and grasps me only in irresolvable relations with instruments” (BN 263). The Other defines one in momentary glances, as they are incapable of acknowledging the tremendous weight of another’s facticity, present, and transcendence all at once. This is why Sartre asserts that “my original fall is the existence of the Other,” as the Other is that which takes what is in actuality a subjective *version* of one’s self and asserts its objectivity, thereby defining and knowing one’s self in a way that one could never personally achieve or advocate for. After all, without the existence of the Other, without the Look, the self is nothingness; with the Other, one’s self is constantly definable in light of the Look. As the Look defines one’s self, it necessarily induces a feeling of pride or shame on behalf of one’s actions, which further cements one’s feeling of ‘being a thing’ rather than of perpetually becoming. This externally created cementation of self is dangerous in Sartre’s view, as it prompts a movement away from authenticity and towards being defined by the Other, which further exacerbates bad faith.

§3: *No Exit*: A Literary Interlude

In order to offer more concrete examples of these philosophical concepts—particularly that of bad faith—Sartre turned to literature. Of course, using literature as a medium for expressing philosophy is hardly a new idea—beginning with works such as Plato’s dialogues, philosophers have always seen the merit in utilizing fiction to share philosophy with both their contemporaries and with the general public. Indeed, the most prominent existentialists are perhaps the most famous for using literature as a vehicle for their philosophical ideas: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, and of course Sartre all published some kind of fiction, through parables, novels, plays, and so forth. Of these fictionalized accounts of existential ideas, Sartre’s one act

play “No Exit” is particularly important for the purpose of this thesis, especially in regard to the black-and-white portrayal of each character’s bad faith.

In this section, I will discuss the basic attributes of Sartre’s “No Exit,” giving context to its characters’ circumstances. Though I will refrain from deeply analyzing the play at this point, I will return to “No Exit” in chapters two and three of this thesis in order to address the ways in which Sartre’s portrayals of his main characters lacks a certain level of nuance, which will aid me in my later exploration of the distinctions between Wallace and Sartre’s philosophies. Thus, I encourage my reader to keep the attributes of each main character in mind as this thesis progresses, and to pay special attention to the ways in which these characters relate to and rely on one another in their perpetuation of their own bad faith.

“No Exit” takes place in Hell and focuses on three main characters: Garcin, Estelle, and Inez. Rather than the typical ‘burning and torture’ depiction of Hell, Sartre’s Hell is one in which the punished torment one another, as they must remain locked in a room with only each other for company for the rest of eternity. Based on the characters’ interactions with one another, it quickly becomes clear that each character represents a particular approach to bad faith, the likes of which has landed them in this peculiar Hell.

Beginning with the simplest character, Estelle is a vapid, purposely naïve woman who desires to be seen as an innocent, careless member of high society. Despite the fact that Estelle murdered one man and prompted the suicide of another in her life, she dives deeply into bad faith by shirking responsibility for her actions, pushing others to define her by her relationships and outward appearance. As a result, Estelle spends most of the play being bounced between Garcin and Inez, willingly allowing herself to be used as no more than an object in a power struggle

between two difficult characters in an attempt to avoid the weight of her own responsibility and the anguish that would come with it.

Unlike Estelle, Inez is frank about her negative qualities, boldly claiming to be fully aware of who she is as a person. Framing herself as a master manipulator who is focused on making the lives of those around her miserable, Inez works to convince her Hell-mates that she is not only a bad person, but that she is *comfortable* with being a bad person. This is, of course, existentially problematic; as evidenced by Sartre's waiter, it is impossible for one to 'be a kind of person,' much less to possess such total knowledge of oneself. In dedicating herself to maintaining this highly specific depiction of self-as-manipulator, Inez claims that she is defined by only her facticity (in which she manipulated people), without any reference to her present or transcendence. Thus, Inez denies the possibility for self-change, making her equally as stuck in bad faith as any of her fellow characters.

Although each of the three characters represent the concepts of bad faith, Garcin's bad faith regarding the actions he took in life, as well as his simultaneous reliance on and fear of the ability of the Other to ultimately define who he is (or perhaps more appropriately in his case, who he was in life) make him the primary example of these notions. Garcin first attempts to deny the fact that he is in Hell altogether, then, upon the entrance of Estelle and Inez, quickly tries to entirely ignore his surroundings, thereby denying his present. It is Garcin's obsession regarding his potential status as a 'coward' that cements his bad faith, as he repeatedly asks—and eventually outright begs—his fellow characters to tell him whether he is a coward. Furthermore, it becomes easy to see Garcin's bad faith when the true story of his facticity is held against the falsified version he is originally so keen to share. Here, rather than owning up to his actions as they truly occurred in life, which would indicate a desire to accept responsibility for and define

himself by his own choices and their consequences, Garcin seeks to define himself by spinning a false tale of heroism. In doing so, Garcin proves that he cares more about the way he is seen by (and therefore defined by) the Other, than he cares about how he might define his own self by taking responsibility for the actions he took throughout his life.

Knowing, then, that Garcin's deepest, most desperate need is to be seen as a 'good' (i.e. strong, courageous, virtuous, etc.) man in the eyes of anyone he encounters— even those people he encounters in Hell, who are so clearly not trustworthy judges of character— his infamous concluding existential remark makes a great deal of sense. After both Estelle and Inez refuse to tell him that he is not a coward, Garcin states that “Hell is— other people!” (NE 45). After a great deal of failed attempts to convince the Other that he is anything but a coward, Garcin breaks through to the truth of the matter: in allowing the Other to define oneself, one maintains no amount of control over that definition. Thus, “Hell is other people” in the case that one gives up one's right to define oneself *for* oneself (i.e. by one's own actions), and instead allows that definition to come from the perceptions of the ever-watching eye of the Other.

§4: Authenticity

Sartre's dark conclusion to “No Exit” unfortunately reinforces a common misconception about existentialism. Namely, that it culminates with the nihilistic views elaborated above: human existence is hellish insofar as it is plagued by hopeless anguish and bad faith in a meaningless world, which is exacerbated by a ceaseless struggle against the Other.⁷ Although

⁷ The image most often brought to mind is of a man wearing all black, the human embodiment of a sigh; he stands smoking a pipe while staring pensively into the depths of the universe, nodding somberly as he finds only despair staring back. This, of course, is a grossly exaggerated portrayal of the existentialist, serving only to perpetuate a false conception that has dogged existentialism from its beginning: that existentialists see the world as a dark, gloomy, meaningless place, and that there is no point in continuing to live in any 'active' sort of sense once one has encountered anguish.

this misconception has one thing right—that existentialists find the world to be inherently meaningless— the idea that existentialism automatically entails the adoption of a pessimistic ideology is far from the truth. Indeed, in Sartre’s case, anguish is seen as a sort of turning point from which further movement can be prompted.

In other words, the real culmination of existentialism is the ‘further movement’ prompted by anguish or despair: this is what Sartre refers to as *authenticity*. Existentialism encourages that the individual move beyond anguish towards an authentic life. As Sartre explains, authenticity is the “self-recovery of being which has been previously corrupted” by bad faith (BN 70, fn. 9). This self-recovery involves the individual reclaiming their facticity and transcendence as their own, and not a responsibility of, or a liberty stolen by, the Other. The authentic individual is one who processes their anguish and moves forward to accept and embrace their freedom and responsibility. The authentic individual makes this move whole-heartedly, and knows that to be authentic means that they must truly hold themselves accountable to make choices responsibly in every situation. For Sartre, ‘making choices responsibly’ means accepting that when we choose for ourselves, we automatically choose for all humanity. Thus, we can never choose evil, “we must always choose the good, and nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all” (EH 24). An authentic individual, then, must always ask themselves whether the action they are taking would be the action they would advocate for all of humanity to take in the given situation, “and if he does not ask himself that, he masks his anguish,” as he is therefore still acting in bad faith (EH 27).

Of course, Sartre (along with all of the existentialists) does not argue that authenticity is an easy state to achieve; in fact, he does not conceive of authenticity as a permanently achievable state at all. Indeed, because existentialism holds that humans are beings with a perpetually

changing, rather than fixed essence, our essence must be a dynamic process, not a static state. Thus, exercising authenticity involves a perpetual struggle to live in authenticity, since one must simultaneously actively acknowledge one's freedom and responsibility towards both one's facticity and transcendence; likewise, one must remain vigilant to not lose one's freedom and responsibility to the Other.⁸ In other words, it is not uncommon to exercise moments of authenticity, but ultimately collapse back into anguish and bad faith. As such, the existentialists acknowledge authenticity is a rare occurrence. Even Sartre gives little time to authenticity in his philosophical tome, *Being and Nothingness*, given his belief that it is such a challenging goal. The hesitancy with which the existentialists address authenticity brings us to Wallace, as Wallace explores both nuanced details of bad faith and a novel way to move closer towards authenticity throughout one's day to day life.

⁸ The idea of the existentially free individual is not only in Sartre, but also in Nietzsche's overman (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), Kierkegaard's knight of faith (*Fear and Trembling*), and Camus' absurd hero (*Myth of Sisyphus*).

Chapter Two

Good Old Bad Faith

When we turn to Wallace's fictional works with a philosophical lens, it becomes clear that he expresses a number of existential themes through his characters. From the modes of being, to anguish, to bad faith, to the Other, to authenticity—Wallace portrays many of his characters as experiencing, confronting, and addressing existential crises and challenges. At the same time, the depiction of his characters isn't simply a method for displaying the idea, 'This is existentialism.' Rather, I contend that Wallace offers characters that are more complicated than the characters of other existential fictional works (such as "No Exit"). In turn, these complicated existential characters reflect back on the existential themes to show that these themes themselves are more complex than other existentialists may have assumed, especially in the increasingly self-focused contemporary world. To develop this analysis, we can begin with Wallace's 'simple' short story, "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XI)" as a straightforward example of existentialism in his work. While "Borders" is only a page and a half—making it significantly more brief than the majority of Wallace's stories—it neatly encapsulates what can be considered the stages of existentialism. To use this story as a precursor to the remainder of this thesis, then, I will trace the general steps of existentialism as they appear in the story, thereby showcasing Wallace's clear attention to existential themes.

To open the story, the protagonist shares the following information: he is dreaming, and in this dream he is with someone who he knows that he knows but who he cannot place. Following this, the protagonist notes that either this non-stranger "suddenly points out" to him that he (the protagonist) is blind, "or else it's in the presence of this person" that he suddenly realizes that he is blind (BI 35). This realization makes the protagonist "incredibly sad," so much

so that the other person notices his sadness, “and warns [him] that crying will hurt [his] eyes somehow and make the blindness worse” (BI 35). Despite this mysteriously well-informed warning,⁹ the protagonist sits down and begins to sob so hard that he wakes himself up from his dream to find himself in bed with his girlfriend. But given that he is now sobbing in reality, he cannot see and believes that he is actually blind. Eventually, his girlfriend calms him down enough for him to (literally) see that his sight is still intact. Upon finding that he has his sight, the protagonist goes to work the following day in an incredibly introspective and enthusiastic mood: he is now truly thankful for his sight, and understands how “fragile” human vision is (BI 35). After a long day of genuine appreciation for his sight, our protagonist returns home, absolutely exhausted.

Despite the brevity of the story, “Borders (XI)” clearly depicts several key themes of existentialism. The protagonist is living in bad faith at the beginning of this story: he’s figuratively ‘blind’ to the truth of his literal (though dreamed) blindness and relies on the Other to tell him that he’s blind. Thus, he defines and understands his own self through someone else’s perspective; he is made an object in the eyes of the Other, meaning he is allowing himself to be objectified by the Look. From here, the protagonist refuses to continue to live in bad faith, as he immediately confronts the truth and horror of his blindness. Here, he acknowledges that he is living in bad faith by allowing the deep sadness prompted by his blindness to overcome him, and enters a state of what must be seen as a sort of an analogue to anguish.

Upon waking up with his sight, the protagonist spends a day living in authenticity; he acknowledges how amazing it is that he can see, and embraces the beauty and phenomenality of

⁹ How would the non-stranger know what’s best for the protagonist, after all?

human sight. That he can see at all, he says, is “really just a lucky coincidence,” noting that he just as easily could have been “one of those blind people [he] sees on the subway” (BI 35-36). After such a long, authentically-lived day, the protagonist returns home utterly exhausted, and promptly crawls into his bed to “more or less pass out” at 4pm (BI 36). That the authenticity of the protagonist is represented as absolutely exhausting echoes the existentialist view that authenticity is not an easy path to take, especially as compared to the ease with which one can live in bad faith. In this respect, then, it is simple to view the story through an existential, and particularly Sartrean, lens: one goes from bad faith, to anguish, to authenticity, with a few transitory steps in between.

While “Borders (XI)” can serve as a simple encapsulation of existential themes, however, I argue that Wallace is no standard existentialist. On the contrary, I argue that Wallace offers a more nuanced depiction of existential issues (especially bad faith, the Other, and authenticity) in real life than the black and white portrayals of those issues offered by many of the ‘original’ existentialists. In doing so, I suggest that Wallace’s depictions demonstrate philosophical arguments that bring forth a Wallacian existential philosophy, one that primarily builds on Sartre’s version of existentialism, but still hinges on the common existential themes presented in chapter one. In this chapter, I will focus on Wallace’s portrayal of bad faith and the Other. As many of Wallace’s works present characters who struggle with anxiety, depression, suicidality, it is natural for Wallace to highlight the darker themes of existentialism in terms of bad faith and the Other.

Perhaps befitting of existential stories in the contemporary world, some of Wallace’s stories focus primarily on characters who are seeking therapy. Interestingly, therapy proves to be a fascinating medium for Wallace to express existential ideas, as serves as a setting where a

patient must necessarily reflect on themselves as a being-in-question, a being-as-becoming, and as a being-in-time. First, typically, a patient's decision to meet with a therapist implies that their being is in question insofar as they have begun to reflect upon their situation in life. Second, this decision further implies a goal to change themselves in some way (their outlook, managing feelings, etc.). As such, they suggest a hope that they are a being-as-becoming. Finally, oftentimes, and as we shall see definitively in Wallace's works, patients examine their lives as beings-in-time. They often examine their facticity in terms of past events that are relevant to their circumstances today. Likewise, they suggest an appeal to their transcendence in terms of achieving the goal of changing themselves for the future, which, again, brings them back to their status as being-as-becoming. Importantly, because a person is so clearly proven to be a being-as-becoming in therapy, the medium itself highlights the fact that seeing one's essence as fixed simply does not work, as a being-as-becoming cannot have a fixed essence. Thus, therapy also serves as the perfect medium to highlight when one is living in bad faith, as a patient's attempt to deny their status as any of those kinds of being during the therapeutic process clearly shows their bad faith.

As therapy proves to be such a versatile medium for existential exploration, then, it comes as no surprise that Wallace uses therapy to portray the existential aspects of his characters' experiences of mental and emotional distress. Wallace particularly focuses on how depression and anxiety can be deeply tied into one's own bad faith and difficulty existing beside the Other. His portrayal of the character, 'the depressed person' offers a rather simplistic version of a character whose depression is inextricably linked to her bad faith, while his depiction of Neal, the protagonist of "Good Old Neon," presents audiences with a much more complex version of a character struggling with bad faith while in therapy. In the following two sections, I

will outline the basic characteristics of each character's struggle with bad faith and the Other. I will open with an analysis of the most important elements of "The Depressed Person" in order to present a more straightforward case of Wallace's use of therapy to portray his characters' struggles with existential issues, which will aid in the following analysis of the inherently more complex protagonist of "Good Old Neon." Based on my analysis of each story, I will propose that these two characters represent the nuances Wallace adds to existentialism, as he steers away from the more black-and-white tradition of those existentialist writers who came before him.

§1: The Depressed Person

'The depressed person' (TDP) is the sole moniker given to the protagonist of Wallace's same-named story. Without a real name, Wallace's protagonist is literally identified by her depression, which matches her personality quite well. Likewise, the depressed person is not only identified by her depression, but she is *defined* by it; she has given up any other aspects of her identity in bad faith, and resultantly sees her identity as circumscribed by all the trappings of what it means to be a 'depressed person.' As shown in Sartre's example of the waiter who cannot *be* 'a waiter,' however, it is existentially impossible to actually be defined by, much less to have, a singular and unchanging self. By defining herself as 'the depressed person,' then, TDP denies that she is a being-as-becoming, being-in-question, and a being-in-time, as she argues that her essence is fixed, and therefore impossible to question or change over time.

The third-person narration in "The Depressed Person" speaks volumes about the opinion of this character that one is intended to have, as the story is marked by a judgmental tone throughout. It is quite easy to side with the narrator on this matter, as any sympathy one might hold for the depressed person quickly dissipates as her story unfolds. Wallace portrays the depressed person's behavior as filled with vices: she is fretful, diffident, self-pitying, and

apparently exasperating on those to whom she confides. Ultimately, Wallace personifies TDP as a character who is trapped in bad faith due to a paradoxical drive. On the one hand, she is hyper-focused to be reassured by the Other (i.e. those to whom she confides) that she is not fretful, diffident, self-pitying and exasperating. On the other hand, this obsession to be reassured by others is what *makes* TDP all of those vices, which is the existential frustration found at the heart of the story. To prove that this paradoxical relationship between TDP's desires and behavior is at the heart of her bad faith, three aspects of the story must be addressed: (1) TDP's fixation on, and simultaneous avoidance of responsibility for, her life-long emotional distress; (2) how that willful avoidance leads to bad faith; and (3) how her reliance on wholly one-sided friendships exhibits her deep-seated bad faith. By reviewing these aspects of "The Depressed Person," it will be made clear that the depressed person's bad faith and difficulty relating to the Other in a non-self-obsessed manner is the cause of her depression.

"The Depressed Person" opens with the third person narrator's explanation of TDP's emotional state: "The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror" (DP 57). While this initial statement may at first inspire sympathy from the reader, it quickly becomes apparent that, given both the derisive tone of the narrator and the actions of TDP herself, TDP's unceasing pain and horror is no more than a testament to her refusal to acknowledge that her situation in life merits much less emotional disturbance than she finds herself perpetually tormented by. Nevertheless, as TDP finds herself supposedly unable to express her deep agony, she "hoped at least to be able to express something of its context—its shape and texture, as it were—by recounting circumstances related to its etiology" (DP 57). It is at this point in the story (i.e. two sentences into the text) that TDP

exhibits her first refusal of responsibility for her plight, as she redirects the attention from her current state and onto an experience of what can be defined as childhood trauma.

Briefly, TDP required extensive “orthodonture” as a child (some manner of headgear, as it were), but her bitterly divorced, independently wealthy parents were more concerned with fighting over which of them would pay for the necessary surgeries and equipment than they were with their daughter’s physical and emotional wellbeing. Indeed, each of her parents “had privately expressed to the depressed person a willingness, if push came to shove, to bite the bullet and pay, explaining that it was a matter not of money or dentition but of ‘principle’” (DP 57). Later on in the story, the depressed person shares that her parents had to hire an arbitrator to put an end to the issue, and at \$130 an hour, he structured a compromise in which each parent was required to pay half of the cost for their daughter’s orthodonture (DP 60).

It is worth acknowledging that the actions of TDP’s parents were morally questionable and appear to be grounded in bad faith. TDP’s parents left their daughter in agony-inducing-pain while awaiting medical intervention she badly needed in order to hurt one another, which exhibits their willingness to engage in the vices of being manipulative and self-absorbed, making their actions morally questionable. Likewise, the parents’ behavior indicates a level of bad faith in that they seemingly avoid responsibility for their actions towards their daughter, as they each blame the opposite parent for their daughter’s mistreatment. Thus, it is entirely understandable that TDP has endured psychological trauma surrounding this event, especially when one considers the fact that her physical appearance was permanently altered from one of the necessary surgeries. All that said, however, the depressed person’s treatment of the event from an adult perspective is troubling to say the least.

Indeed, though the event TDP describes could very well be considered traumatic, her continued reliance on the event as a reason for her enduring depression is a mark of extreme bad faith. Similar to Sartre's gambler—who quits gambling only until he enters the casino, remembers that he has always been 'a gambler,' so believes he really has no choice but to gamble—TDP's definition of herself as 'the depressed person' exemplifies a willingness to define her entire self by the events of her facticity alone, which is a large factor of her bad faith. Resultantly, TDP's description and continued treatment of the orthodonture event must be taken with great attention to temporality, as the effects of such an event, though lasting, simply cannot account for her continued willfulness against accepting responsibility for her emotional state so many years later, nor can any of the events from her facticity that she calls on to justify her present emotional state.

To fully understand the issue in TDP's treatment of this event, it is beneficial to review the following passage:

And the depressed person always took care, when as an adult she attempted to describe to a supportive friend the venomous struggle over the cost of her orthodonture and that struggle's legacy of emotional pain for her, to concede that it may well truly have appeared to each parent to have been, in fact, a matter of "principle," though unfortunately not a "principle" that took into account their daughter's feelings at receiving the emotional message that scoring petty points off each other was more important to her parents than her own maxillofacial health and thus constituted, if considered from a certain perspective, a form of neglect or abandonment or even outright abuse, an abuse clearly connected—here she nearly always inserted that her therapist concurred with this assessment—to the bottomless, chronic adult despair she suffered every day and felt

hopelessly trapped in. (DP 57)

The word choice, tone, and length of this sentence are all incredibly telling when considering TDP's present relationship to this trauma of her facticity. To begin, that the word "always" is used in the first line implies that TDP has described this event to multiple friends on multiple occasions, even so many years since its occurrence. In addition to the temporal implication included in the word "always," that the depressed person finds it necessary to "always" couch this trauma in such a passive, indirect manner is highly problematic from an existential viewpoint. Importantly, while the existentialist would grant that it is natural for TDP to experience some level of psychological trauma as a result of her parents' actions, they would also counsel against the dangers of using trauma from one's facticity—or, to that point, *any* event from one's facticity—as a reason to neglect one's responsibility. Thus, while TDP would be well within her rights to openly say "I am angry/upset/traumatized by my parents actions" in an existential framework, she would also need to take responsibility for the feelings she continues to have regarding the events of her facticity. Instead, however, she chooses to "always" go out of her way to 'concede' that her parents were, to their own eyes, truly acting out of principle, after which point she acts as though she is merely suggesting the idea that "if considered from a certain perspective," her parents' actions could completely account for "the bottomless, chronic adult despair she suffered every day and felt hopelessly trapped in," which is, she feels the need to mention, a statement that her therapist fully agrees with. All of these carefully placed nuances in the depressed person's language surrounding the results of her parents' actions have a singular goal: to convince anyone who will listen that her depression isn't her fault, that she wouldn't be like this if not for the actions of others. In other words, TDP is acting in bad faith in that she persistently flees from responsibility for her character, choosing

instead to place the responsibility for defining her selfhood (and for justifying that definition) on those who surround her.¹⁰

TBD's fixation on blame continues throughout the entirety of the story, particularly as she continues to reference and build upon the orthodonture event. Though she insists that she only mentions the struggle with her parents for the same reason given initially—given her inability to express her feelings of lifelong depressive agony, she can only share the 'context' of her feelings—it becomes apparent early in the story that the real reason for her fixation on that struggle is so that she can have an object for blame. As shown above, TBD's need to blame her parents for her lifelong despair is the pinnacle of bad faith, and is made even more problematic by her refusal to actually blame them in her own words. Instead, she only insinuates such blame, furthering herself from the responsibility of even actively blaming her parents. Furthermore, though the depressed person's actions at first glance indicate that her goal is, as proposed above, to convince others that her unhappiness is not her fault, it is not so; instead, her true goal is to persuade *others* into convincing *her* of that particular untruth.

Thus, the depressed person's bad faith is most clearly seen through her relationship with the Other, particularly in her reliance on her so-called "Support System." It is worth noting that, like TDP herself, her "Support System" does not have names; they are not depicted as subjects, or as individuals who have essences, but as objects, as 'things which have a function,' where that function is, selfishly, to support TDP. Indeed, as TDP describes them, her support system is made up of "approximately half [a] dozen friends," who "tended to be either female

¹⁰ Of course, she stops just shy of outright blaming her parents by using hypothetical language (i.e. their actions could constitute abuse and be seen as the root of her issues "if considered from a certain perspective"), as she seems to be aware that fully blaming others for her issues will not be accepted by her audience.

acquaintances from childhood or else girls she had roomed with at various stages of her school career, nurturing and comparatively undamaged women ... whom the depressed person often had not laid eyes on in years and years” (DP 57). Despite the clear physical and emotional distance between TDP and her so-called ‘friends,’ she integrates her Support System into her life by calling one or another of these women on a nightly basis to discuss her deep sadness. Rather than ask for help or advice in a straightforward, productive manner, TDP asserts to each friend that she is in no way trying to play the victim, while simultaneously playing the victim in every case. This is clear evidence of TDP’s paradoxical drive that was mentioned earlier in this section: by relying her Support System (the Other) as a group of functional objects whose sole purpose is to convince TDP that she is not self-pitying and exasperating, TDP denies that she is responsible for her actions and for her essence. Thus, TDP’s reliance on her Support System both exacerbates her bad faith, and is grounded in her bad faith.

To give an early example of this behavior, TDP notes that she is “always careful to share with the friends in her Support System her belief that it would be whiny and pathetic to play what she derisively called the ‘Blame Game’ and blame her constant and indescribable adult pain on her parents’ traumatic divorce or their cynical use of her” (DP 57-58). But it is obvious that this is exactly what TDP is doing—indeed, it would be difficult to offer a more concise summary of TDP’s actions than she has given here, herself. That she finds the need to call these friends just to insist that her behavior is not the problem is destructive behavior, as each call she makes reinforces her bad faith. She cannot use her Support System to help her, because one who was truly ready for help would at the very least be *open* to the idea that they are in some way responsible for their circumstances.

There are two remaining examples of TDP's use of her Support System that merit analyzing, particularly as instances of her inability to recognize the depths of her bad faith. The first instance unfolds as follows:

The former acquaintances and classmates who composed her Support System often told the depressed person that they just wished she could be a little less hard on herself, to which the depressed person responded by bursting involuntarily into tears and telling them that she knew all too well that she was one of those dreaded types of everyone's grim acquaintance who call at inconvenient times and just go on and on about themselves. (DP 58)

It is important to open with the simple fact that here, TDP is correct in her self-analysis: she *is* “one of those dreaded types.” When her Support System friends tell her the truth—that she is too hard on herself, and could benefit from spending less time agonizing over how terrible she is—she compounds the problem by ‘involuntarily’ bursting into tears, thereby furthering their perception of her as someone who will “just go on and on about [herself].” She refuses to listen to their advice, which connotes the idea that these calls were, from her own, subconscious view, never intended to solve her problems, at least not as long as the solution involved requires a push towards taking responsibility for her treatment of herself. Rather, her intention was to bemoan her issues in an attempt to further hide within the scope of her facticity, or sometimes in a view of her present that is necessarily overtaken by her continued relationship to her facticity (as all of her actions are, so long as she continues to define herself as ‘the depressed person’). In that respect, TDP is unwilling to address her bad faith: despite her tri-weekly therapy appointments,¹¹

¹¹ Which is itself a problematic number, as no adult with a job and a life should have the time or money to attend therapy sessions thrice weekly.

TDP remains steadfast in continuing to depict herself as “one of those dreadful types.” She clings to the self-definition of ‘the depressed person,’ and every time she makes a call to her Support System she furthers that perception of herself in her own eyes and in the eyes of the Other. Worse yet, by verbally defining herself in this way to her Support System, she is putting these words in their mouths. In doing so, TDP places the members of her Support System in a position to take responsibility for defining her, thereby furthering her bad faith by denying the responsibility to define herself.

The second instance of TDP’s unawareness of her bad faith occurs sometime after her therapist (who encouraged her to build and subsequently rely on this Support System in the first place) commits suicide. Without having her therapist to help her, TDP elevates the need of her Support System, calling several members of it throughout the workday, on their work numbers, from her place of work. This is, of course, highly inappropriate behavior, a fact of which TDP is well aware. She shares that she always constructs “elaborate, vociferous” apologies on these calls, and goes on to express “gratitude to the Support System for just Being There for her, because she was discovering again, with shattering new clarity in the wake of the therapist’s wordless abandonment, just how agonizingly few and far between were the people with whom she could ever hope to really communicate and forge intimate, mutually nurturing relationships to lean on” (DP 63). This passage is important for three reasons: First, it clearly evidences TDP’s conception of her Support System as an objective unit, not as a group made up of individuals—otherwise, the name of an individual member of her Support System would have taken the place of “the Support System” in her expression of gratitude. Second, TDP’s designation of her therapist’s suicide as “wordless abandonment” is a clearly selfish and callous way to characterize such an event. Third, based on this character assessment of TDP, her view that she desires to be

part of a “mutually nurturing” relationship suggests her self-deception and, ultimately, bad faith. Again, TDP’s bad faith centers on her need to persuade the Other to define her so that she can feel absolved from bearing responsibility for her circumstances. Thus, she relies on the members of her Support System to constantly aid her in her bad faith, a behavior that is simply not conducive with any real kind of friendship; thus, TDP’s assertion that she wants “mutually nurturing” friendships must be seen as false. This point is firmly supported by the ending of the story, in which TDP details a phone call with a Support System member who is not only a divorced mother of two, but who is also suffering from cancer. According to TDP, this “greatly reduced the number of activities and responsibilities in [the woman’s] full, vibrant, undepressed life, and who thus was not only almost always at home but also enjoyed nearly unlimited conflict-free availability and time to share on the telephone, for which the depressed person was now careful to enter a daily prayer of gratitude in her Feelings Journal” (DP 64). Here, TDP proves herself to be so incredibly self-focused that she is completely incapable of empathizing with her friend’s pain and horror, managing to fail to take into account how being a divorced mother of two recovering from debilitating, life-altering cancer could certainly lead one to a state of depression.¹² She goes out of her way to characterize this woman as “enjoying” such a large amount of free time to talk on the phone, and as living an “undepressed” life. In the end, the only prayer she can send her friend is one of gratitude for listening to her “problems.”

¹² It is important to acknowledge TDP’s refusal to acknowledge the problems of the Other, as Wallace prompts his audience to consider how the individual might benefit from being aware of the Other’s needs or problems in “This is Water.” This concept will be addressed further in chapter three of this thesis, but it is worth noting here.

As this “gravely ill” Support System member is “frequently retching” throughout the call, TDP continues to be self-absorbed, focusing on her own “agony” and begging for her ‘friend’s’ aid (DP 68). The object of this phone call is simple:

The depressed person proposed now to take an unprecedented emotional risk and to begin asking certain important persons in her life to tell her straight out whether they had ever secretly felt contempt, derision, judgement, or repulsion for her ... [she] stressed that she was serious about this: the honest assessment of her by an objective but deeply caring confidante felt, at this point in time, like a literal matter of life and death. (64)

Though TDP claims that this approach is an “unprecedented emotional risk,” she is in fact taking little to no emotional risk in asking this of her Support System. For her to take an emotional risk, she would have to be willing to make these insights herself, rather than pawn off that responsibility to the Other. Additionally, TDP’s ultimate goal is specifically oriented towards her now self-acknowledged ‘inability’ to care for anyone but herself, which is something she only comes to realize (though in a false, wholly unproductive manner) after the death of her therapist. She acknowledges in the phone call that it is somehow problematic that “although the depressed person had agonizing feelings aplenty since the therapist’s suicide, these feelings appeared to be all and only for *herself*” (DP 64). Thus, in this particular phone call, “she was asking sincerely ... honestly, desperately: what kind of person could seem to feel nothing—‘*nothing*,’ she emphasized— for anyone but herself?” (64). The irony of this non-predicament is clear: TDP, in the midst of bemoaning her inability to care about anyone other than herself, begs a cancer-stricken woman who she hasn’t seen since their time together at boarding school to offer her some kind of comfort, all while wholly ignoring the very real problems of the woman on the other end of the telephone. Beyond all else, this exclusively one-sided phone call shows just how

deeply mired in bad faith TDP has encouraged herself to become, as she is too deeply scared to accept responsibility for a lifetime's worth of self-pity and missed opportunities.

As TDP's story comes to a close, it becomes apparent that she has made no movement toward authenticity— in fact, she has managed to become even more deeply mired in her bad faith by the final lines of the story. Relying on the Other and on a determinedly unchanging view of her facticity, TDP attempts to justify the idea that she is *essentially* depressed, making her depression a fact about her being that she cannot change. Thus, TDP's ultimate bad faith is founded in her refusal to accept responsibility for her actions and for her continued relationship to the events of her facticity; though compounded by her selfishness in her relationships with the Other, TDP has no one to blame for her bad faith but herself.

§2: Good Old Neon

While the depressed person is certainly more complex than, for instance, Sartre's black-and-white characters of bad faith in "No Exit," Wallace depicts a character struggling with bad faith of a particularly complex nature in "Good Old Neon," one of the author's longer short stories.¹³ The basic plotline of the story goes as follows: Neal, a man in his late twenties, finds himself outwardly successful but inwardly at a loss in life. He has always seen himself as a fraud, which he attributes to his lifelong tendency to manipulate those around him in order to get what he wants, which is to be seen as impressive by others. Thus, Neal outrightly insists to his audience that his actions have always been dictated not by his own values, but by what he perceives as that which will garner him the most admiration from those around him. Although

¹³ To offer a summary of "Good Old Neon" is as challenging as one who is familiar with Wallace's writing might expect; the dense, sprawling nature of the text, along with the narrator's immensely frustrating proclivity to break off into several-page long tangents while only partway through a story or another tangent makes a concise summary of the text all but impossible to provide.

the story technically takes place during the period in which Neal attempts therapeutic analysis, the narrator jumps from tangential story to tangential story in a calculated yet desperate attempt to somehow prove the essentiality of his fraudulence to his audience, as well as to distract his audience from identifying the truth of his bad faith.¹⁴

Indeed, it becomes readily apparent as Neal's story unfolds that his trouble in escaping his fraudulence is not founded directly in his methodology, but in his very perspective: regardless of what he tries, Neal will never manage to move forward from bad faith until he ceases to view his fraudulence as an essential trait and acknowledges that he is responsible for his essence, which would either allow him to move into true anguish, and therefore potentially into moments of authenticity. As Neal repeatedly rejects this rather well-founded conclusion throughout therapy, he finally opts to commit suicide rather than face the abject horror of responsibility after a lifetime of avoidance and excuses. In this section, I will highlight that Neal's purposeful misconception of his fraudulence (as an essential trait) is a major factor in his suicide. Following this, I will argue that Neal relies on an attitude of purposeful arrogance to defend himself from entering a state of existential anguish due to the crushing weight of responsibility. Thus, I will argue that Neal uses his arrogance as a tool to convince his audience and himself of his 'essential fraudulence,' which is, in turn, how he attempts to circumvent the

¹⁴ The existential analysis of Neal is further complicated by three other components of Wallace's story. First, unlike TDP, Neal speaks directly to one specific person: *you*, the reader. Not only does he identify you as the reader, but he brings you even closer to his story. He acknowledges that "you" are sitting in his car with him, listening to him tell his story. Second, as Neal tells "you" early on in the text, he is telling you his story *after* his own suicide. Finally, Wallace, himself, is a character (or cameo) in the story: in the last two pages of "Good Old Neon," Wallace writes a character bearing his own name (David Wallace) into the narrative in the space of the Other, offering a very interesting layer to the story's conception of authenticity and the individual. This latter aspect of the story will not be addressed until chapter three of this thesis, but it bears mentioning here as it will be alluded to throughout the remainder of this section. In this section, I will ignore the final four pages of the story concerning suicide and the David Wallace character. Instead, I will spend the remainder of this section discussing Neal's depiction of his 'fraudulence' as an essential characteristic, which will in turn display his bad faith.

anguish that comes with knowing that one is wholly responsible for one's essence, which, finally, places Neal in bad faith.

To begin, Neal suggests that one of the issues he is facing is that he is unsettled by his "essential fraudulence" (OB 153). He suggests that a 'fraud' is someone who acts in order to impress a certain perception of oneself on the Other. Neal asserts that he is a fraud because of his lifelong practice of manipulating others (the Other) to get what he wants. Importantly, however, what makes him so fraudulent in his eyes is not only that he manipulates others for his own gain, but *why* he manipulates others: rather than manipulate others in order to satisfy some sort of deeper, more meaningful desire, Neal's very desire is to impress the Other; thus, his actions and subsequent successes all reflect whatever behaviors he understands to be those that are valued by the Other, which is a prominent aspect of his bad faith.

Rather than simply say that he has occasionally acted fraudulently, however, Neal specifies that he is *essentially* a fraud. He assumes that he does not *choose* to act this way; rather, his essence preceded his existence, which makes it impossible for him to change his behaviors. As such, Neal directly contradicts the existentialist's mode of being-as-becoming by insisting that he cannot change, since one who cannot change cannot 'become' anything other than that which one already is. Likewise, Neal undermines the mode of being-in-time: by invoking fraudulence as his essence, he denies his responsibility for his facticity, present, and transcendence. Finally, this false ascription of an essential quality to himself leads Neal to deny his mode of being-in-question. By assuming (and pretending) that he is essentially fraudulent, Neal negates the possibility of questioning his existence in any existentially meaningful way. ¹⁵

¹⁵ I say Neal 'pretends' to see himself as not a being-in-question because therapy is, interestingly, a medium in which one's being must be in question; otherwise, there is nothing to discuss. While Neal attends therapy,

Thus, Neal's "essential fraudulence" demonstrates bad faith. At the same time, his character is more complicated than a simple linear reading of bad faith. Although Neal frequently expresses his belief that his fraudulence is an essential identity trait and therefore cannot be changed, he simultaneously insists that he wishes to be anything but a fraud, to know what it feels like to strive for genuine authenticity rather than general admiration. To this point, Neal opens his narrative by stating "my whole life I've been a fraud" (OB 141). He defines himself as a fraud due to his lifelong practice of manipulating others to get what he wants. Importantly, what Neal 'wants' is not that which is valuable to him for personal reasons of passion or authenticity. Instead, he strives to achieve that which he believes the Other (or "other people") will see as valuable, informing us that "pretty much all I've ever done all the time is to try to create a certain impression of me in other people" (OB 141). As such, Neal warns the audience at the start that he cannot be trusted to give a wholly accurate account of whatever story follows, as his desire to "create a certain impression" of who he is in other people has always won out over his own desires or inclinations towards authenticity or even honesty.

It is interesting to note that within just these two initial moments of the text, Neal already exhibits qualities akin to those of Inez and Garcin from "No Exit." Just as Sartre's manipulative Inez insists that she knows who she is, that she has always been a manipulator and that she cannot change, Wallace's Neal insists that he is essentially fraudulent in order to impart a certain sense of self-assurance to his reader. Like Inez, Neal insists that he (1) 'knows' who he is beyond any shadow of a doubt, and (2) that, because he has an essential trait, it is impossible for him to

however, he hardly participates in the therapeutic process in a genuine or constructive manner, as he never truly questions his motives for his actions. Instead, Neal constantly and stubbornly asserts that, regardless of what other possible suggestions might be made to the contrary, he is essentially fraudulent, therefore never questioning his necessarily faulty premise on which all of his bad-faith-driven arguments are built.

change. Interestingly, however, Neal is as much like Garcin as he is like Inez in his definition of himself as a fraud. Like Garcin, who will do anything to force the Other to see him as a hero, Neal will do anything to convince the Other of his utter perfection as a person. In this light, both Neal and his audience are repeatedly persuaded to accept that Neal simply is as he is: he argues that “the fraud part of me was always there” (OB 150). Importantly, that Neal is as much like Garcin as he is like Inez makes his character more complex than Sartre’s singular and archetypal characters of bad faith, which itself displays ways in which these existential concepts themselves are more complex for Wallace than they are for Sartre. The Inez-like side of Neal blatantly disregards responsibility for his fraudulence by arguing that it is an essential trait, landing him squarely in bad faith. Likewise, the Garcin-like side of Neal only exacerbates that bad faith: as a ‘fraud,’ the reason for which Neal makes all of his choices in life is the opinion of the Other, as a ‘fraud’ seeks to appear to embody whatever the Other values most so as to be accepted and admired by the Other. As such, Neal cannot achieve authenticity, as an authentic individual sees that their essence is forever changing as a result of their actions throughout their existence, and therefore cannot shirk responsibility for their essence in any respect.

Furthermore, I contend that Neal’s bad faith is exacerbated by what I refer to as his *purposeful arrogance*, or his self-deceptive defense mechanism used to avoid anguish by falsely positing his superior intellect. Neal intentionally acts as though—and outright asserts that—no one else is quite as smart as he is; thus, no one else is capable of understanding the absolute truth of his “essential fraudulence,” which he “knows” to be his problem. Neal constantly reminds his audience of his high intellect, alluding to his intellectual capabilities as the reason for which he has an easy time manipulating others, as well as to prove that his fraudulence is essential: as he says, “I knew what my problem was, what I couldn’t do was stop it” (OB 145). Any time a

person presents Neal with a potential step on the path away from fraudulence and towards authenticity, he deflects this option by arrogantly offering repeated, largely sophistic arguments that aim to explain ‘exactly’ why he is incapable of change, without ever actually proving anything of the sort. He further supplements this defense by re-framing that person as comparably too incompetent to understand it is impossible for him to change. In this respect, Neal denies the possibility of self-change by arrogantly asserting the truth of his essential fraudulence. This defense mechanism only reaffirms, if not deepens, his bad faith insofar as it prohibits himself from sincerely examining possible roads exiting bad faith and moving towards authenticity.¹⁶

Perhaps the strongest evidence of how Neal’s purposeful arrogance reinforces his bad faith can be found in his relationship to his therapist, Dr. Gustafson. In Neal’s initial introduction to his time in therapy, he explains

I spent maybe the first twenty times or so in [therapeutic] analysis acting all open and candid but in reality sort of fencing with [Dr. Gustafson] or leading him around by the nose, basically showing him that I wasn’t just another one of those patients who stumbled in with no clue what their real problem was or who were totally out of touch with the

¹⁶ Importantly, as a result of this paradoxical relationship between Neal’s desire for authenticity and his deep-seated arrogance and desperately ignored existential anguish, Neal tries a variety of methods to escape his problem. These various methods include everything from electro-shock-therapy, to celibacy, to sleeping with a different partner every night for two straight months, to meditation, and so on (OB 142). Based on the alternative methods Neal tries before entering therapy— which is the only method mentioned apart from mediation that is designed specifically to get in touch with one’s selfhood— it is clear that our narrator attends therapy only as a last-ditch effort to circumvent, rather than genuinely move forward from, the problem of his fraudulence. As it happens, Neal shares that he enters therapy because a lot of people he knows have tried it; indeed, he says, “I tried [therapeutic] analysis like almost everybody else then in their late twenties who’d made some money or had a family or whatever they thought they wanted and still didn’t feel like they were happy. A lot of people I knew tried it” (OB 142). This motivation indicates a further appeal to the Other, as Neal can only try therapy once he knows others are engaging in it as well, and therefore will not judge him for doing so.

truth about themselves. When you come right down to it, I was trying to show him that I was at least as smart as he was and that there wasn't much of anything he was going to see about me that I hadn't already seen and figured out. (OB 143)

Neal purposefully crafts this arrogant demeanor to help prove to his audience that, even in therapy, his primary focus is always to impress the Other. Eventually, however, Neal says “[I] finally came out and told him about being a fraud and feeling alienated (I had to use the uptown word, of course, but it was still the truth) ... I said I knew what my problem was, what I couldn't do was stop it” (OB 144-145). Neal's purposeful arrogance shines through when remarking that he “had to use the uptown word” to describe his condition, as that phrasing clearly insinuates his condescending disregard for the therapeutic process even on a level as basic as the terminology used within the field. Likewise, one of the first things Neal admits to attempting to accomplish in therapy is to convince his therapist that there is no possible way to help him, as anything Dr. Gustafson says could not possibly be more insightful than whatever Neal already knows about himself.

In keeping with this attitude, Neal explains that he is “reasonably sure” that, following his confession of being a fraud, Dr. Gustafson will ask how Neal could be honest about his fraudulence if he were truly essentially fraudulent (OB 146). Rather than pause to reflect on this question, or even display to his audience that the therapist did in fact ask the question at all, Neal spends seven pages ‘defending’ the reasons for which this cannot be the case before ultimately informing his audience that Dr. Gustafson did ask the question, which Neal argues, proves that he was never going to be able to help to begin with. Before Dr. Gustafson asked the question, however, Neal says that the therapist looked as though he “thought he'd caught me in some kind of logical contradiction or paradox. And I went ahead and played a little dumb, probably, to get

him to go ahead and say it,” partly, he says, because he liked the man and wanted him to feel accomplished, and partly because he “still held out some hope that what he’d say might be a little more discerning or incisive than I had predicted” (OB 146). Neal’s patronizing phrasing again conveys to his audience that Dr. Gustafson is undoubtedly less intelligent than Neal himself. As that arrogance is used a defense mechanism to avoid the anguish of total responsibility, it is unsurprising that Neal also spends the next seven pages moving through tangent after tangent in order to distract his audience from considering Dr. Gustafson’s point by again trying to convince his audience of his essential fraudulence.

Neal eventually returns to the topic at hand, at which point he shares that Dr. Gustafson does, in fact, ask the question Neal predicted he would ask. After hearing Dr. Gustafson ask the question, Neal says he feels somewhat deflated, “because now I knew he was going to be just as pliable and credulous as everyone else, he didn’t appear to have anything close to the firepower I’d need to give me any hope” of getting out of the “trap of fraudulence and unhappiness” he believes himself to be stuck in. Here, Neal argues that Dr. Gustafson’s point could only be helpful in the case that Neal was actually circumventing his essential fraudulence by sharing his feelings during therapy. In response to this, Neal asserts that since “the real truth was that my confession of being a fraud and of having wasted time sparring with him over the previous weeks in order to manipulate him into seeing me as exceptional and insightful had itself been kind of manipulative,” it is the case that Dr. Gustafson’s point is built on the false assumption that Neal behaved in a way that was contradictory to his essential fraudulence. As that is an assumption which Dr. Gustafson only had, according to Neal, *due* to Neal’s fraudulence, Neal claims that the point does not stand.

Not surprisingly, Neal asserts that therapy “didn’t really work, although it did make everyone sound more aware of their own problems” (OB 142). Importantly, Neal notes that therapy simply makes everyone *appear* more aware of their own problems, but relates that such an awareness doesn’t necessarily resonate fully throughout one’s self. Of course, this is how Neal *personally* experiences therapy. Yet his purposeful arrogance leads him to state these opinions as factual, thereby furthering his attempt to prove why therapy (among countless other tactics) has no possibility of helping him change his so-called fraudulent ways. Indeed, as Neal asserts that the purpose of therapy is to enable an individual to sound more aware of oneself without actually being any more aware of oneself, he is enabled to argue that such a process could only be seen as a furthering of fraudulence, since ‘sounding aware’ while not ‘being aware’ is fraudulent behavior. This represents another specious argument, as Neal offers no proof that therapy actually does anything of the sort, aside from his own sophistic assertion of such a premise. Thus, by arguing that he’s somehow fully aware of this clear, factual, unambiguously true imbalance between the goal of therapy (i.e. growth or change) and this supposed ‘actual’ result of therapy, Neal only manages to further exhibit how deeply he is stuck in denial: he remains close-minded to the potential benefits of therapy, and instead desperately attempts to manipulate the process of therapy itself to be somehow complicit in his fraudulence. In so doing, he reaffirms an attitude of bad faith grounded in the guise of his self-purported incredible intelligence.

This experience in therapy perfectly encapsulates the root of Neal’s problem, as it is by arrogantly maintaining the truth of his essential fraudulence to both his audience and, more importantly, himself, Neal attempts to hide from the existential truth of the matter: that it *is* possible to change, but not until he gets out of his own way by accepting that existence precedes

essence. Unless or until that happens, Neal can easily win any argument through his sophistic methodology, as he phrases those arguments in ways that reflect his assured knowledge of his supposed essential fraudulence. Thus, any suggestion that could possibly help Neal change, including those made by Dr. Gustafson, must necessarily begin with the assertion that he is *not* essentially a fraud, as the idea that his fraudulence is essential is the only reason Neal supplies to support his inability to change.

Chapter Three

This is Authenticity

In chapter two, we saw that Wallace's characters are existentially more complex than the characters from other existential literature in terms of both their bad faith and their relationship with the Other. In turn, we saw that this complexity reflected a deeper, more nuanced account of those existentialist themes on the whole, particularly when compared to the more black and white Sartrean account. In this final chapter, I argue for two central points regarding Wallace's account of existentialism. First, I suggest that, like existentialism in general, it is a misconception to read Wallace's works as culminating in a pessimistic ideology. Instead, I contend that Wallace ultimately encourages the individual to actively acknowledge the possibility of living authentically, and to strive for that authenticity even if one can only achieve it for brief moments. Second, similar to my analysis of Wallace's account of bad faith and the Other, I argue that Wallace's exploration of authenticity suggests further complexities to this existential goal in at least two ways. On the one hand, Wallace suggests that authenticity and the road leading to it, involves more incremental steps and changes than existentialists may have assumed. On the other hand, Wallace maintains that, contrary to Sartre, our view towards the Other may be used for promoting our own authenticity, rather than exacerbating our bad faith. For Wallace, one can achieve authenticity alongside the Other, rather than in spite of the Other.

To begin this chapter I will address Wallace's presentation of Sartre's keyhole analogy in "Good Old Neon," noting the parallels and nuances between the two accounts. This discussion will enable me to analyze the importance of Wallace's commencement speech, "This is Water," which I will argue is the culmination of his philosophical ideas. Using the commencement speech as a baseline, I will argue that Wallace's existential philosophy is in no way a nihilistic or

truly negative view of humanity, but that, as supported by “This is Water,” his fiction is more often than not a depiction of the mistakes we as humans are prone to making in the self-centered mix of our everyday lives, not a judgement of our potentiality for good.

§1: Wallace, Sartre, & The Keyhole Analogy

In “Good Old Neon,” Wallace presents his version of the Sartrean keyhole analogy.¹⁷ For context, this analogy takes place at what, at first read, appears to be the end of “Good Old Neon,” as Neal is in the process of taking his own life (I say ‘appears to’ for reasons that will later become clear).¹⁸ Neal has just taken a large amount of Benadryl, (which, as he notes, “doesn’t help all that much once you’re under way”), and is now coasting in his car, driving towards his imminent demise (OB 178). To open this section, Neal informs his audience (who, as a reminder, is literally “you” the reader) that “now we’re coming to what I promised and led you through the whole dull synopsis of what led up to this in hopes of. Meaning what it’s like to die, what happens” (OB 178). Importantly, Neal’s “essential fraudulence” still clearly informs his speech even at this pivotal moment in the text, as he finds it necessary to defensively insist upon how “dull” his story has been thus far, clearly in an attempt to mold his audience’s opinions of him, himself.

¹⁷ Though Wallace doesn’t refer to his keyhole as Sartrean, I contend that Wallace’s use of the analogy is rooted in Sartre’s use. I will implicitly demonstrate this connection in this section.

¹⁸ Two notes about this scene. First, in classic Wallace style, the final four pages of “Good Old Neon” encompass a multitude of existential themes, too many to dissect in this chapter. With that said, I encourage my reader to keep the existential ideas of being-in-time, being-for-others, and being-as-becoming at the forefront of their mind, as it is otherwise simply impossible to convey the weight of Neal’s final words. Second, similarly, though a summary of the scene is in some ways necessary, there is something distinctly attitudinal within the original writing that bears enough significance to the meaning of the passage itself to include much larger sections of it than in previous chapters of this thesis. This inclusion is tantamount to my driving points, as the tone of Wallace’s final pages here closely mirrors the tone of “This is Water,” thus, I hope my reader will bear with me in my inclusion of such a great deal of text

Moving forward a few lines, Neal takes an authoritative stance on what death is like, asserting that “It’s not what anyone thinks, for one thing. The truth is you already know what it’s like” (OB 178). Though he begins this thread with a clear focus (i.e. what death is like), he quickly changes direction, offering an homage to Sartre’s keyhole:

You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny keyholes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes. (OB 178)

Clearly, Wallace's depiction of seeing each other through keyholes echoes, and serves as a reference to, Sartre's analogy of the keyhole in depicting one's existential relationship to the Other. Neal's description of the keyhole mirrors Sartre's in that it begins with the acknowledgment that one's self is made up of innumerable factors, so many that it truly feels like an entire universe exists within ourselves. In Sartre's existentialism, one cannot fully capture the essence of a person observed through Sartre's keyhole. For Sartre, this is partly why the Other is a danger. The Other only has a limited perception of you, but nevertheless aims to capture you, and define you, with that limited perception. Wallace echoes this sentiment: as Neal points out, it is blatantly impossible to show one's whole self to the Other, as the space which we are allotted to share our selves with others is akin to the size of a keyhole. Neal's keyhole is almost identical to Sartre's thus far; if not identical in literal presentation, the two bear clear similarities at least in terms of the over-arching message encapsulated by the analogy. The initial point of difference, however, occurs within the last line in the quotation above: here, Neal turns

his attention to one's *own* limited perception of the Other, not to the Other's limited perception of one's self. Though this represents a seemingly minor nuance, I believe it shifts the narrative from an external problem driven by the Other to an internal one led by the individual, at least for the given moment.

Following this shift in narrative, Wallace starts a new paragraph in which his depiction of the keyhole truly begins to differ from Sartre's. Importantly, unlike anything Sartre discussed in his strictly philosophical depiction of the keyhole, the more artistically inclined medium of literature allows Neal (Wallace) to offer the following take on the matter:

But it does have a knob, the door can open. But not in the way you think. But what if you could? Think for a second — what if all the infinitely dense and shifting worlds of stuff inside you every moment of your life turned out now to be somehow fully open and expressible afterward, after what you think of as you has died, because what if afterward now each moment itself is an infinite sea or span or passage of time in which to express it or convey it, and you don't even need any organized English, you can as they say open the door and be in anyone else's room in all your own multiform forms and ideas and facets? (OB 178)

It is important to remember that Neal is delivering these statements from the grave, as it were; thus, Neal is specifically depicting the after-death experience as one in which the door to one's own self and the selves of others are wholly open, thereby solving the issue of the keyhole. The idea that Neal is describing this experience as one that takes place in the afterlife as opposed to in life might initially appear to detract from any nuances between Wallace and Sartre's depictions of the keyhole; after all, Sartre's atheism precluded him from seeing that as any sort of boon for humanity. Importantly, however, Wallace's depiction of Neal post-death is akin to Sartre's dead

characters in “No Exit;” in other words, it is not meant to be taken as a literal after-death scenario, but as a situation that depicts an idea of philosophical importance in life. Similarly, then, by asking the question, “but what if you could” open the door, Neal opens an avenue of thought that Sartre never considered: hypothetically, what would happen if one *could* share their whole selves? Despite its overall impossibility, it is important to consider why we would want to open the door, to ask what one would stand to gain from doing so.

Pausing to reflect once more on the absolute vastness of the self, Neal reflects on a concept that proves to be indicative of Wallace’s philosophy as a whole:

Because listen ... What exactly do you think you are? The millions and trillions of thoughts, memories, juxtapositions — even crazy ones like this, you’re thinking — that flash through your head and disappear? Some sum or remainder of these? Your history? ... The truth is you’ve already heard this. That this is what it’s like. That it’s what makes room for the universes inside you, all the endless infinite fractals of connection and symphonies of different voices, the infinities you can never show another soul. (OB 178-179)

The final line of this passage weighs heavily on both Wallace and Sartre’s philosophy, as Neal once again points his audience towards recognition of the obvious— that it is simply impossible to share one’s whole, ‘true’ self with the Other. Though this leans towards another point of similarity, it becomes clear from the statements immediately following the above section of Neal’s ongoing monologue that we’ve reached a deeper point of difference between Wallace and Sartre in viewing the nuances of their parallel analogies. Continuing from the above section, Neal says:

And you think it makes you a fraud, the tiny fraction anyone else ever sees? Of course

you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock. But at the same time it's why it feels so good to break down and cry in front of others, or to laugh, or speak in tongues, or chant in Bengali — it's not English anymore, it's not getting squeezed through any hole. (OB 179)

In Sartre's philosophy, the impossibility of sharing one's whole true self leads to the Look, which is itself seen to be an obstacle to authenticity, as the external cementation of one's self by the Look encourages one to live in a way that conforms to the Other. Based on Neal's depiction of that impossibility, however, it is clear that Wallace views the issue from a standpoint of necessity. In fact, Neal's lengthy explanation here can be summed up existentially with two points. First, as suggested above, it is obviously impossible to reveal one's whole self to the Other (and vice versa). Second, and more importantly, this impossibility need not be as dangerous as Sartre and the existentialists assume. Here, Wallace offers an almost Stoical (though still existential) response to the problem of the Other insofar as we freely choose to change our attitude by no longer defining the Other as an ontological challenge. Instead of fearing the Other as a danger to our own authenticity, Wallace (through Neal) suggests that we accept the necessity of their presence, accept that the Look will *feel* problematic to us, and wholeheartedly attempt to use that knowledge to our own gain while striving for authenticity¹⁹.

¹⁹ It is once again absolutely pivotal to remember how this story ends: Neal goes through with his suicide, and tells this story from the grave. In making this character choice, Wallace perfectly exemplifies the discrepancy between 'obvious' and 'easy' in this lifelong scenario of selfhood. Although Neal makes this idea (i.e. that in lieu of the ability to share one's whole self with the Other, of course one would pick and choose the bits to force through the 'keyhole') out to be no less than painfully obvious (see: "it's called free will, Sherlock"), his ultimate suicide proves that it is one thing to understand this idea, while it is another thing entirely to live by it with ease.

In this respect, one might strive to take responsibility for all of one's actions, but also to accept the reality that not all of those actions can be shown to the Other, and thus not all of those actions will appear to define one in the eyes of the Other. It is up to the individual, then, to decide what aspects are important enough to share, while also accepting responsibility for those actions that are hidden away, as it is the near-infinite summation of all of these acts that make up one's self, regardless of who sees it.

Wallace's call to recast the problem of the Other as, what I call, *the necessity of the Other* entails a unique depiction to relate the individual, freedom, and the Other. This depiction is consistent with existentialism in at least two ways. On the one hand, Wallace returns the focus on the starting point in existentialism: the individual human being. For instance, just as existentialists emphasize the modes of being as understandable through one's own subjective perspective, so too Wallace emphasizes the role of the individual determining and taking responsibility for what is revealed to the Other. On the other hand, Wallace restores a sense of existential freedom to the individual in their relationship to the Other. Rather than being forced externally to accept that the essence of the Other is an ontological problem, Wallace emphasizes that the individual can freely choose whether to ultimately see the Other as a problem or not. Just as Sartre and the existentialists acknowledge that the individual is free to choose which attitudes to have towards one's facticity and transcendence, Wallace extends this freedom to include selecting which attitude to have towards the existence of the Other. As will become clearer in the next section, Wallace recommends a more positive attitude of the Other, as such an attitude would be beneficial towards authenticity.

As alluded to near the beginning of this section, these pages of "Good Old Neon" do not actually comprise the end of the story; despite the fact that the final footnote on the page finishes

with “THE END” (OB 179), there are two pages remaining after what initially appeared to be Neal’s final say. Jarringly, these pages present a new character’s interpretation of Neal’s plight, as none other than “David Wallace” is introduced as an old high school peer of Neal’s. “Idly scanning class photos” from his old yearbook, David Wallace (hereafter referred to as ‘David’) is depicted as “trying, through the tiny little keyhole of himself, to imagine what all must have happened to lead up to [Neal’s] death in a fiery single-car accident he’d read about...like what sort of pain or problems” would have resulted in the suicide of such a bright classmate (OB 180). Importantly, David is described as “happening to have a huge and totally unorganizable set of inner thoughts, feelings, memories and impressions of this little photo’s guy” (OB 180). In sifting through these memories, it is noted that David had thought of Neal as a guy with

this seemingly neon aura around him all the time of scholastic and athletic excellence and popularity and success with the ladies, as well as of every last cutting remark or even tiny disgusted gesture or expression on this guy’s part whenever David Wallace struck out looking in Legion ball or said something dumb at a party, and of how impressive and automatically at ease in the world the guy always seemed, like an actual living person instead of the dithering, pathetically self-conscious outline or ghost of a person David Wallace knew himself to be. (OB 180-181)

This passage stands out for multiple reasons, all of which revolve around Wallace’s (the author’s) conception of the Other. Here, high-school age David was unable to see Neal as anything more than the face he put on: a smart, glowing boy with a bright future and nothing to hide, a natural at nothing less than life itself. Simultaneously, David’s perception of Neal is intertwined with his own being-objectified-by Neal, as he notes Neal’s (literal and existentially-weighted) ‘looks’ in his direction as partial determinants of David’s own perception of himself.

Of course, the blatant irony is that David was wholly incorrect in his own objectification of Neal, which is understandable given the fact that Neal was actively trying to hide every ‘shameful’ part of himself from anyone looking at him. That said, Wallace’s insertion of a character bearing his own name into the text serves a deeply important purpose, as he shows his reader that he, like all humans, is capable of making the same mistakes as his characters.

Likewise, the final passage of the story exemplifies Wallace’s philosophy overall in a way that is in many ways more straightforward than in any of his other fiction. The final moment in the text is presented as follows:

David Wallace trying, if only in the second his lids are down, to somehow reconcile what this luminous guy had seemed like from the outside with whatever on the interior must have driven him to kill himself in such a dramatic and doubtlessly painful way — with David Wallace also fully aware that the cliché that you can’t ever truly know what’s going on inside somebody else is hoary and insipid and yet at the same time trying very consciously to prohibit that awareness from mocking the attempt or sending the whole line of thought into the sort of inbent spiral that keeps you from ever getting anywhere ... the realer, more enduring and sentimental part of him commanding that other part to be silent as if looking it levelly in the eye and saying, almost aloud, ‘Not another word.’ (OB 181)

Here, David is depicted as struggling to try to see past Neal’s purposefully executed exterior, which proves to be a difficult, but not entirely impossible feat; at the very least, it seems to be possible to *try* to momentarily shift one’s perception in order to acknowledge the Other as a fellow subject, rather than to continue in determined objectification of the Other. Though David is only able to even attempt this shift in perception “in the second his lids are down,” the idea

that the shortness of the timeframe for which he is able to attempt this shift should not, he realizes, be considered a deterrent against his choice to attempt it to begin with. Similarly, he fights against the cynical, mocking side of himself that desires to emphasize how pointless it is for David to try to see what deeper struggles might have existed in Neal long before his suicide, as it is impossible for an outsider to know the answer to such a question. Yet, despite the fact that even the “realer, more enduring and sentimental part” of David seems to know that he cannot see deeply into Neal from the perspective of an outsider, he pushes himself to stop seeing that truth as a reason to cease any attempts to *try* to see the greater picture of Neal’s struggles. In short, Wallace argues in the final moment of this text that, though David may only have the strength to engage in this struggle for a single second of what feels like a veritable eternity, that is no reason not to try. Thus, by using his own name in the final pages of “Good Old Neon,” Wallace insists that his audience see this story, and indeed this final moment, as one that the author himself sees as being of the utmost importance.

§2: “This is Water”

Indeed, the idea that one must try to reevaluate one’s definition of the Other so as to acknowledge them as subject rather than object proves to be pivotal for Wallace, as is evidenced by his focus on the idea in his commencement speech, “This is Water.” The only commencement speech Wallace ever gave, “This is Water” is the epitome of the philosophical ideal Wallace conveys throughout his short fiction. Unlike Sartre, who sees the individual as being in a perpetual war with the Other, constantly fighting between subject and object, Wallace appeals to a less self-centered approach to existentialism. Here, Wallace presents an individual’s existential freedom to choose as the key to a beneficial relationship with the Other, in which one actively chooses to give the Other the benefit of the doubt when defining them through the Look. In this

section, I will highlight some of the more important facets of the philosophy presented in “This is Water,” pausing occasionally to compare some of Wallace’s points back to the stories analyzed throughout chapter two and three of this thesis, as well as against Sartre’s “No Exit.” Through these comparisons, I will show that Wallace’s commencement speech offers the *culmination* of his hopefully-inclined philosophical ideas, not an introduction of those hopeful ideas. In doing so, I will highlight the fact that, however dark and depressive much of Wallace’s fiction may appear to be, the philosophy he presents in his commencement speech perfectly aligns with that which is presented throughout his fiction, thereby proving that his philosophy was far from negative all along.

As an opening remark for his commencement speech, Wallace offers his audience a short parable:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

Wallace immediately notes that the inclusion of such “didactic little parable-ish stories” has become a “standard requirement of U.S. commencement speeches,” but one, he says, that is “less bullshit” than most others in the genre.²⁰ Here, however, Wallace cautions his audience against assuming that he will be taking on the position of the “wise old fish” in his speech, and instead

²⁰ Indeed, it is no secret that the genre itself is often awash with lame clichés and grandiose appeals to a hopeful, shining new world for the graduates standing before the speaker. To those familiar with Wallace’s work, it certainly comes as no surprise that he moves to offer a critique of the commencement speech genre within the first moments of his very own commencement speech: these grandiose promises of a bright and shiny future feel much too baseless for Wallace, too unrealistic a promise to make to this new generation of working Americans solely on the basis of their having graduated college.

encourages these graduates to consider that “The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.” Life, he says, “the day to day trenches of adult existence,” is far too easy to skip over altogether in our own minds. When caught up in our own selves, and, more importantly, in where we’ve come from or where we are going, we fail to recognize the infinite beauty and possibility in the world around us *now*. Of course, such an idea sounds highly cliché— in a world obsessed with easy-to-experience epiphanies, replete with less-than life-changing lightbulb moments and hopes for automatic self-growth, it is all too easy to write off Wallace’s point as a simple reminder to stop and smell the roses. This, however, is not Wallace’s intention; while he repeatedly notes the cliché nature of his words, he encourages his audience to consider whether even the most abused and overused clichés might have a fundamentally (and existentially) important kernel of truth at their centers, in the case that one takes the time to look beyond the neatly packaged exterior of the overused cliché.

Speaking to the task at hand, then, Wallace notes that “the main requirement of speeches like this” is to “try and explain why the degree you are about to receive has actual human value instead of just a material payoff.” This call for human values echoes the sentiment of one’s being-in-question, in terms of one’s meaning and purpose. Coming closer to his main point, Wallace posits that the answer to this question is yet another cliché that the genre has gotten right: “a liberal arts education is not so much about filling you up with knowledge as it is about teaching you how to think.” While this may sound insulting to many students who are certain that they “already know how to think” (which is, he notes, how he felt at his own commencement), he insists that it is truly not insulting, “because the really significant education in thinking that we’re supposed to get ... isn’t really about the capacity to think, but rather about

the choice of what to think about.” Wallace asks those who remain skeptical, who still feel that “[their] total freedom of choice regarding what to think about seems too obvious to waste time discussing,” to “think about fish and water, and to bracket for just a few minutes [their] skepticism about the value of the totally obvious.” The appropriateness of his emphasis on this short parable becomes more apparent as the speech continues: just as the young fish fail time and again to notice the water around them, existing within it without ever questioning their awareness of it, Wallace insists that we as humans perpetually fail to question our so-called certainties regarding the world around us. Instead, we accept our own perception of the world as fact, and base all of our subsequent views, beliefs, and behaviors on those assumed certainties, never bothering to even consider what might change if we were to choose to see things differently. We become trapped in what Wallace describes as “blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up.”

Instead of allowing ourselves to become trapped by these certainties, Wallace pushes his audience to see what ‘teaching one how to think’ really means: to him, he says, it means “[t]o be just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties. Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded.” This is not a general or unsubstantiated claim, either— going forward, Wallace offers an example of the “total wrongness” of a thing he says most of us tend to be automatically certain of, the idea that:

everything in my own immediate experience supports the belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realist, most vivid and important person in existence... There is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of... Other people’s

thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, and real.

The resemblance between this passage and the behavior of characters like the depressed person (TDP) or of Neal is hardly difficult to see, as the point in either case remains the same: it is so easy to see oneself as the center of the universe, to assume that everyone else in one's immediate vicinity is concerned with objectifying *you*, defining *you*. In fact, Wallace says, it is beyond easy: it is "our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth" to see ourselves as the most important thing in any given circumstance, the subject to everyone and everything else's object. To offer an example of this behavior from Wallace's fiction, it is clear that TDP sees the world as out to get *her*, just as she views her 'friends' as no more than *her* Support System, her therapist as not a person, but as literally just *her* therapist, her parents as just the people who ruined *her* life, and so on. Likewise, Neal defines himself as essentially fraudulent partially because of his propensity to manipulate those around him, noting—in a somehow meta, obnoxiously intellectualized manner— that he is a 'bad' person for treating others only as objects. Thus, in both "This is Water" and in many of his stories like "The Depressed Person" and "Good Old Neon," Wallace warns his audience of making an all too easy error in judgement, which is to say, to make the mistake of ceasing to choose how one will exercise one's judgement at all.

This warning, he insists, is not an attempt to lecture anyone on "virtues" or "compassion." Instead, he says, this is "a matter of choosing to do the work of somehow altering or getting free of my natural, hard-wired default setting which is to be deeply and literally self-centered and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self." Presented as no less than a life-and-death skill, the ability to choose how one sees the world has the power to change the

narrative of one's life, even if that choice can only last for moments at a time. One must be able to "exercise some control over how and what you think ... to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience." If, Wallace argues, "you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life, you will be totally hosed." Though he downplays the general horror of this reality in his initial phrasing²¹, Wallace asserts that denying the importance of this kind of day-to-day choice of how to see the world is not only the precursor to, but in some ways equal to, suicide.

Here, Wallace asserts that "the truth is that most of these suicides are actually dead long before they pull the trigger." In this statement, Wallace alludes to the countless people who live lives like Neal, people who go through their "comfortable, prosperous, respectable adult life dead, unconscious, a slave to your head and to your natural default setting of being uniquely, completely, imperially alone day in and day out." In Neal's case, his denial of the possibility that he could choose to behave differently, or even just to choose to perceive his past, present, and future behaviors as having different connotations than those which he has determinedly ascribed to them, accounts for the kind of 'living death' Wallace describes here. While it is true, however, that we as humans have little choice but to live our lives day by day, and while it is true that by the time we're well into adulthood, as Wallace notes, every day appears identical to the thousands of days that have come before, that does not leave us stranded in a choiceless reality of frustrating monotony. Instead, Wallace asserts that we are left with a very particular kind of choice: we can choose how we will view those days, how we will exist within the world around us. We can choose to be like TDP, forever begging for the approval of others in order to avoid

²¹ Indeed, the casual tone imparted in his use of the phrase "totally hosed" does not do much to prepare his audience for what comes next

taking responsibility for how our own worldviews have impacted and continue to impact our choices every day, or we can choose to be like Neal, forever denying the reality of our ability to choose to begin with. Or, as Wallace posits, perhaps we can choose to strive towards authenticity in incremental steps, one day, one moment at a time.

To develop this point, Wallace introduces the idea of the “life routine”, consisting of “dreary, annoying, seemingly meaningless routines” where one performs the same actions “day after week after month after year.” This dreary nature of the life routine, however, is not Wallace’s point: “The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing is gonna come in.” For Wallace, the path to authenticity begins with the steps, or choices, we make when we are embedded in the life routine. It is on a day to day basis, during those moments that seem to all the world to be the absolute least important aspects of one’s entire life, where choosing becomes more important than anything else, “[b]ecause the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don’t make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I’m gonna be pissed and miserable every time I have to shop. Because my natural default setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me... And who are all these people in my way?”²²

²² It is worth noting that Wallace’s depiction of the “life routine” is not foreign to existentialism. In fact, existentialists emphasize the dangers of succumbing to such a monotonous and robotic way of life. For existentialists, this routine is a characteristic of bad faith insofar as one’s activities conform to the Other writ large socially. Existentialists have various terms for the larger social aspect of the Other. Sartre refers to it as “the Crowd”; Kierkegaard, “the Public”; Friedrich Nietzsche, “the herd”; Martin Heidegger, “the They”; and so on. But unlike many other existentialists, Wallace doesn’t simply raise the life routine as a cautionary tale concerning the loss of freedom or as an impetus for an existential crisis. Instead, he goes further. He grants that the life routine is natural—we all face such routines—and that they are a danger for losing one’s freedom and being in bad faith. But Wallace furthers his analysis with an escape plan of sorts, offering a method to move from the life routine to authenticity.

Wallace's method is existential in nature, as he emphasizes that we ought to *choose* who to be in the first place: "if I choose to think this way in a store and on a freeway, fine... Except thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't have to be a choice," it is instead the natural setting we operate on. Thus, we never push ourselves to question whether *we* are in fact the one in someone else's way, opting to act on the implicit, subconscious assumption that our needs outweigh those of everyone else in sight. Wallace acknowledges that it is incredibly difficult to make the choice to see past the innate certainty of our own self-importance, and once again cautions his audience against believing he is giving moral advice, "or that I'm saying you're supposed to think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it. Because it's hard. It takes will and effort, and if you are like me, some days you won't be able to do it, or you just flat out won't want to." Here, Wallace emphasizes that authenticity is never easy, as the authentic individual must work to choose to see the world in a way that goes beyond one's initial, 'hard-wired' conception of it. Despite the level of difficulty inherent in this approach, however, there is hope to be had: if one truly works to be "aware enough to give yourself a choice, you can choose to look differently at" each person one encounters, authenticity is possible.

In other words, Wallace's approach to authenticity involves recasting the problem of the Other as the necessity of the Other. Instead of blindly allowing ourselves to operate in the life routine on such an obviously false assumption (i.e. that the world revolves around 'me'), he argues that "I can choose to force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket's checkout line is just as bored and frustrated as I am," or that it is possible that the lady screaming at her child behind you in the line is usually nice, but maybe "she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer." These aren't likely

scenarios, of course, but, as he says, “it’s also not impossible” for them to be true; it is not impossible that every single person one encounters throughout the day has had it ten times as worse than the day the ever self-centered ‘you’ have had.²³ Really, Wallace says, “it just depends what you want to consider” as possible, or on what perspective you choose to take.

This aspect of Wallace’s philosophy serves to highlight yet another area in which Wallace’s philosophy diverges from Sartre’s, as Sartre sees the relationship with the Other to be one of perpetual war, of working against being ‘defined by’ the Other; take for instance, the idea that “Hell is other people,” or even of the subject-object relationship through the Look. Wallace, however, sees the idea of engaging in a perpetual war with the Other as a useless and highly negative waste of time— though easy to do, it only serves to perpetuate our own misunderstanding of ourselves as the absolute center of the universe, which is far from beneficial in working towards authenticity. Interestingly, it is somewhat counterintuitive to be an existentialist and to support that subject-object war as a necessarily unchangeable aspect of life (as Sartre so often does), as that seems to revoke the ‘choice’ an agent should have to view the situation differently. Obviously, an existentialist relies on an agent’s choice as the focal point of responsibility, so for Sartre (among others) to reject that choice when it comes to one’s participation in a ‘perpetual war’ with the Other seems both logically inconsistent, and wholly unhelpful to the philosophy on the whole.²⁴

²³ Again, an example of this possibility is found in the character of ‘David Wallace.’ As a high schooler, David was too unable to see past his own self-conception to bother questioning whether Neal had anything deeper to offer than his seemingly bright persona; as an adult, he pushes himself to at least *try* to see what kind of incredible internal struggles might have led him to kill himself.

²⁴ By rejecting Sartre’s assumption that the individual is in a perennial subject-object war with the Other, Wallace’s existential approach is similar to Martin Buber’s existentialism. For Buber, normatively, it is harmful to conceive of others through a subject-object (or “I-It”) relationship; instead, he proposes that the individual should recognize others as fellow existentially free individuals, thereby constructing a subject-subject, or “I-Thou” relationship.

Unlike Sartre, then, Wallace pushes back against the idea of a perpetual war with the Other, as such a relationship between the self and the Other cannot be beneficial for either party, and certainly does little in the way of promoting authenticity in an individual. Just as Neal asks his audience to consider what would happen ‘if’ it was possible for the metaphorical keyhole-door to open, for people to be able to truly see one another’s deeper selves, Wallace asks his audience to ask what would happen ‘if’ one were to make the choice to perceive others in a different possible light, regardless of the probability of that conception being real or true.. Here, Wallace returns to the connection between certainty and possibility: while one can operate on the assumption that one’s perception of the world is certainly accurate, it is important to ask ourselves what would happen if that conception *wasn’t* certain, if there could be more to the Other than meets the eye. Incidentally, this is a courtesy we all desire from the Other— similar to Neal and David in “Good Old Neon,” it is common for an individual to feel as though others don’t really know them, or that if they did, they would have a different opinion of them. Between both his short stories and his commencement speech, Wallace argues that by actively choosing to acknowledge that feeling as one that likely exists in the Other as well as in ourselves, we enable ourselves to consider the possibility that, just by considering the idea that we can change our automatic definitions of the Other by giving them the benefit of the doubt, there is a chance we will positively affect our own actions and understanding of the world.

Wallace argues that the best approach is to at the very least work to *consider* why one makes the choices one does, especially when one would otherwise mindlessly operate on a falsely constructed view of a self-centric reality. In considering why one chooses to see the Other in a certain way, one is confronted with the reality that one’s initial perception of the Other is likely no more or less probable than an infinite number of other possible perceptions of the very

same person, based on the very same set of information available. As he argues, “if you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options,” and that awareness alone brings one closer to authenticity than any automatic, choice-less action could ever do.

Thus, Wallace insists that the fundamental importance of learning how to think “has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over again: This is water. This is water.” Like the young fish who had never considered water before, humans are too often so blindly certain of their present reality that they never stop to acknowledge, let alone question, their own supposedly certain realities. Just as the young fish must eventually come to question the very thing that has so obviously encompassed his universe for the entirety of his existence, we as people must make the conscious choice to stop, to consider just how certain our ‘certainties’ are when acknowledging the reality in which we find ourselves. We must make this choice not in an effort to define, reflect on, or move forward toward some greater pinnacle of existence, but simply to acknowledge the countless possibilities that might exist within each and every life that surrounds us, and within our own. It is only in those moments in which we stop to question that which seems to be the absolute, most obviously certain thing in each of our own, individual, self-centered universes—in those moments that we stop to choose—that we are truly authentic individuals. What is authenticity, then? This, Wallace says, is authenticity.

Conclusion

As we near the end of this thesis, I invite my reader to pause to reconsider Sartre's waiter. As has hopefully been made quite clear by this point, it is impossible for a waiter to *be* a waiter, as one's essence cannot be defined by a singular aspect of one's existence. Just as the waiter cannot be accurately defined as 'a waiter,' then, I must now take a moment to object to the definition of David Foster Wallace as 'a writer.' Though such a *classification* is accurate, as Wallace belongs to the class of writers, to *define* him as a writer is both limiting and far from encompassing of his whole self. In defining Wallace as a writer, we close our minds to the possibility that he might have something more to offer than just literature. Just by opening Wallace's work with the understanding that it is literature produced by 'a writer,' we as audience members are prepared to recognize philosophical underpinnings in the work, but too often find ourselves entirely unable or unwilling to recognize fully formulated additions to philosophy within literature. As a result of this (often inadvertent) close-mindedness, works like Wallace's get left to be studied primarily as literature, despite the presence of original and substantive philosophy within them.

Thus, while the disciplines of philosophy and literature are, of course, markedly different, it is increasingly important to promote a willingness to utilize the strengths of each field in a combinatory fashion, as the result of such a combination has the potential to be, for instance, as impactful and influential as David Foster Wallace's clearly existential literature. Indeed, for Wallace, literature was a medium through which the incredible importance of concepts such as bad faith, the Other, and authenticity could be addressed in a realistic and nuanced light. Likewise, literature offered Wallace a format in which he could express philosophy in a manner that captivated the attentions of both the academic population and the general public, which is

undeniably something that many areas of philosophy are unable to accomplish. Among copious other works of his clearly existential fiction, captivating and complex stories like “Good Old Neon” and “The Depressed Person” allowed Wallace to bring philosophy to the forefront of the minds of his audience, whether or not readers are aware of that fact while engrossed in Wallace’s writing. With an example like Wallace at hand, it is not difficult to see how literature can be among the most useful tools available to a philosopher— clearly, literature is medium through which one can show, rather than explain, philosophy in a manner that is accessible not only to other philosophers, but to wider audiences who may otherwise never consider the deeply important questions asked within philosophy. This thesis, then, stands not only to show the worth of viewing Wallace’s work in light of the existential philosophy that culminated within it, but also to display how much philosophy stands to gain from embracing literature’s place in the discipline as a whole.

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