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Facing the uncertainties of being a person: On the role of existential vulnerability in personal identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of existential vulnerability in the experience of personal identity and how identity is found and created. Existential vulnerabilities mark a boundary between what humans can bring about willfully or manipulate to their advantage and what is resistant to such actions. These vulnerabilities have their origin, on an ontological level, in fundamental conditions of human existence. At the same time, they have implications on a psychological level when it comes to self-experience and identity formation. Narrative and value-based identity depend on how a person relates to finitude and the ambiguous side of lived experience. Relational identity depends on how a person relates to existential aloneness and the fact that the meaning and value of our actions are partly out of our control; they are always also dependent on other people's responses to us. Bodily identity makes us feel continuous and real, but at the same time vulnerable to death and the gaze and actions of others. Being 'thrown' into an arbitrary life context is also a form of existential vulnerability. Authentic psychological identities can develop by giving meaning to these circumstances and balancing acceptance of existential vulnerability with the courage to make choices and act.

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Introduction

Individuals find and create their personal identities through engagements within unique historical and psychobiological contexts. A larger existential landscape surrounds this context. In this landscape, death and bodily being are two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, an individual needs belongingness, meaning and freedom to find and create a personal identity. An implication is that we do not make our identities on stable ground. How are we to understand the role of vulnerability in the ways we form our personal identities?

Theoretical approaches highlight different foundational sources of personal identity; relationships and values, meaning-making and narratives, and

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embodiment. We can see identity as the part of personality we most actively define ourselves, compared to personality traits (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Innate temperamental tendencies will to a more substantial degree, contribute to personality traits. In contrast, personal identity involves agency; it is something that we discover, form, and shape within the frames of our social contexts.

We create personal identities through a unique pattern in how we interact with others, their ideas, life-views, values, and our material environment (Erikson, 1963). Through playful communion, we build creative ways to understand and reflect upon who we are (Fonagy & Target, 2007; Winnicott, 1971). We are authors of unique stories about our lives and are simultaneously inspired by stories others have told (McAdams, 1993). From a perspective on bodily experience, we can state another position. In contrast to our attempts to control and structure who we are through narratives, the lived bodily experience of our lives is ambiguous and floating; aspects of our sense of selfhood and aliveness are silent and forever untold (Stern, 2018; Winnicott, 1965b).

When building personal identity, all these processes are an intermingling between ambition and vulnerability, of making and being made, which we also can describe as a tragic dimension of the human condition (Nussbaum, 2001). No one escapes this tragic dimension; we can understand it to belong to our existence or our 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1957; Jaspers, 2010). This paper will examine vulnerability as an existential aspect of personal identity. In this context, the term 'existential' refers to the experiential dimension of the concerns and conditions that intrinsically belong to being humans, such as death and finitude, freedom and responsibility, our need for meaning, our relational being, and our embodiment. These concerns and conditions are not something we should describe as essences; the existential domain is a deep ontological structure always open to many interpretations (Heidegger, 1957; Sartre, 1992). Heidegger distinguishes between the ontological and the ontic level. The ontological level is our common, shared, and always already given existential conditions. The ontic level is issues and concerns related to conditions in specific life situations. In this paper, I will examine: how does the way we relate to experiences of vulnerabilities, given at an ontological level, form and shape us on an ontic and, thereby, psychological level? How does our existential vulnerability affect identity as part of our personality?

In everyday language, vulnerability means to be easily hurt, harmed, or open to attack. The risk of harm or hurt can be physical, emotional, or a combination. Our everyday use of 'vulnerable' relates to specific situations; certain circumstances leave us more vulnerable than others. Some of these are situations we try to avoid, and with good reasons, such as not exposing ourselves to conditions that make us susceptible to disease or public

humiliation. Robert Stolorow (2016) regards existential vulnerability as painful possibilities that define our existence and loom as constant threats, such as injury, illness, death, and loss. Although there will be overlaps and interactions, we can distinguish existential vulnerabilities on an ontological level from situational vulnerabilities on an ontic level, specific to our personal, cultural, or social situations. Mackenzie et al. (2014) describe a subset of situational vulnerabilities as 'pathogenic vulnerabilities,'; a concept that refers explicitly to varieties of situational influences that are troublesome in a moral sense, such as oppression. Erich Fromm (1947) describes a similar distinction between existential dilemmas and historical contradictions. In line with Hanne Laceulle (2017), I will use the term 'contingent vulnerability' to encompass situational, historical, and pathogenic vulnerabilities.

Some situational vulnerabilities have considerable overlap with vulnerabilities founded on an ontological level. Such overlap can occur in circumstances that demand courage. Sometimes we must do what frightens us on a specific situational level and, simultaneously, face uncertainties at the level of existential concerns, such as death or isolation, as unavoidable possibilities in life. Certain events call for actions that shatter us and wake up a heightened existential awareness. These can be extraordinary events such as the risk a person poses of being burnt when she or he does a heroic act and saves a child from a fire. It can also be the more minor but possible life-changing turning points in everyday life, such as when a person has fallen in love and takes the risk of being rejected when taking the initiative to deepen the relationship. Situations like this can make us aware of our life's and ambition's precariousness. Such cases can also give us insight into how vulnerability plays a prominent role in our lives; it is also part of our human condition. In some sense, we are always at risk. At an existential level, vulnerability is a constant.

Thomas Fuchs (2013) defines existential vulnerability as a characteristic of specific individuals; these are especially vulnerable to 'boundary situations' that confront us with the givens of existence that we cannot escape, such as death. He describes the phenomenology of certain psychological disorders, such as hypochondriasis, in light of this type of vulnerability. Recognizing the existential aspects of such disorders can help us understand and empathize with those experiencing them. However, this is possible because all of us are existentially vulnerable on an ontological level. When the going gets tough, even the toughest consider retraction as an option. Heather Wallace (2020) points to this normalcy of existential vulnerability when she connects it with the relational dimension of identity; we are vulnerable as the meaning and value of our actions depend on other people's responses to us. However, the definition of existential vulnerability I use here is broader and more in line with Hanne Laceulle (2017), who works

within a gerontological context. Laceulle points out that we need languages to address a wide range of vulnerabilities we cannot remediate because they intrinsically belong to the human condition. These can, for example, be death and finitude and the undetermined side of the choices that bring us purpose and meaning.

This paper aims to explore the role that existential vulnerability on an ontological level plays in the experience of personal identity and how personal identity is found and created. Experiencing a sense of continuity is essential for personal identity. Therefore, first, I will examine the foundation of this experience of sameness over time and its solidity or lack thereof. After this, I will explore vulnerability as an existential given and how humans relate to it, often in defensive ways but also through constructive, courageous, and resolute ways that demonstrate strength. With this as a point of entry, I will examine the role of existential vulnerability within an integrative framework. I will relate to four domains of personal identity: meaning and narrative, relationality, value, and embodiment.

Non-permanence and existential continuity

Traditionally philosophers and theologians used the idea of a 'soul' or 'spirit' to explain the ontological foundation of selfhood. In later and contemporary discussions within philosophy and psychology, consciousness and awareness, memory, embodiment, morality, relationality, and linguistic criteria have been suggested to explain personal continuity (Martin & Barresi, 2006; Taylor, 1992). We can ask the question about the foundation of personal identity in both numerical terms on the one hand and qualitative and practical terms on the other (Atkins, 2004; Olson, 2003). When we ask a numerical question, we can explore how and why a person can be said to be 'one and the same' through time. However, in qualitative terms, identity is linked to the 'who am I?' question. In qualitative terms, we can ask about the conditions for our lived experience of continuity as persons through time.

Nothing can change its numerical identity. In numerical terms, it would be absurd to say, 'I am not that person anymore.' However, the sentence can be deeply meaningful in a qualitative sense. The scope of this article is related to the qualitative question about identity and the practical and psychological dimension of what we identify with and the role that vulnerability on an ontological level plays in these self-definitions within everyday life.

Existential thinkers, starting with Nietzsche, criticize the idea of personal identity in numerical terms or as some form of inner 'essence.' Nietzsche (2000, 2008) argues that the idea of an internal inner 'soul' is an illusion when trying to dissolve our understanding of human subjectivity from Christianity's framework (Nietzsche, 2000, 2008). However, even if there is no inner essence,

identities can be of practical use when navigating life. We can create identities. Nietzsche postulates a bodily dimension, a 'will to power' that might give rise to identities, partly due to their significance for our survival. In his perspective, identity originates at the boundary between the body and mind. It also has an undetermined nature. According to Nietzsche, we are free to create our identities according to our own chosen values.

We find similar conceptions about the 'illusory' nature of self in Buddhist thought. The Buddhist idea of anatta implies that a state of non-self is at the deepest level of personal identity. Clinging to the notion of a 'core' is both a reaction to human suffering and something that causes further suffering (Goldstein & Kornfield, 2001). However, in Buddhist thought, the idea of anatta has a paradoxical relationship with the concept of karma: Although the self is an illusion and non-permanence is the rule, there is also a 'someone' meeting consequences for past actions (Nicholson, 2012). Which values we choose to embody through our actions matters.

With some interesting parallels to Buddhist thought, Jean-Paul Sartre (2021) proposes that 'existence precedes the essence.' The idea of having an 'essence' lures us away from personal freedom. We live in 'bad faith' when we try to legitimize our choices on our 'essential' characteristics and take as given assumptions about who we are (Sartre, 1992).

Similarly, Heidegger (1957) proposes that any statement of an inner 'essence' in a metaphysical sense has an alienating imprint on life. Such statements hide our true but undetermined and 'groundless' nature on an ontological level. We are basically 'thrown' into a historical context without any predetermined essence; we are Dasein (being-there), inhabiting a world where meaning is created on an ontic level, in specific practical and relational situations, through our personal and collective involvement.

Although continuity is not a characteristic intrinsic to the self, Nietzsche, Buddhist thinkers Sartre, and Heidegger describe a sense of continuity in life arising through commitments, choices, and creative acts. An implication of these views on a lack of inner 'essence' on an ontological level is that personal identities are fundamentally vulnerable. We do not make them on solid ground; they can always change and perish.

Existential vulnerability

The fragility of human existence on an ontological appears most explicit when we address the topic of death. Heidegger (1957) describes 'being-toward-death' as an existential concern that makes a certain quality of self-awareness possible. I can only die my own death; death is always personal. As a boundary for my existence, death also makes finitude a topic in everyday life. On an ontic and psychological level, death gives life's engagements,

choices, and paths a quality of personal meaning. It provides a framework for a lifetime and makes it mine.

Inspired by Heidegger, Karl Jaspers developed conceptualizations of 'boundary-situations,' circumstances that potentially heighten our awareness of personal existence: struggle, death, hazard, and guilt (Fuchs, 2013; Grieder, 2009). These situations confront us with the boundary of our being; they are absolute, tied to, and inevitably given because we are humans. As Alfons Grieder (2009) points out, there is an ambiguity in Jaspers' concept of 'boundary situations.' Sometimes Jaspers uses it to describe situations that only some people will experience; at other times, he seems more to allude to what we more correctly can describe as 'boundary conditions.' These conditions represent fundamental ontological givens in life that all people must relate to, either directly or indirectly. Struggle is always a potential in human relationships. Death is inevitable and absolute, life has a risky and fateful side, and a human life implies responsibilities and guilt. Although he gives weight to slightly other phenomena, Irvin Yalom (Yalom, 1980) similarly points at 'givens of existence' when he describes 'ultimate concerns': death, meaninglessness, isolation, and freedom. They are an 'inescapable part' of being human and something every person must come to terms with to realize their potential. Yalom's conceptualization highlights one of two polarities. When he describes meaninglessness as an ultimate concern, he uses this as a point of entry to explore the role of meaning-making: When he describes isolation, Yalom also discusses the essential existential role of human relationships. He chooses to explore a polarity by addressing the poles we tend to resist. When we relate to these polarities, 'existential anxiety,' in Søren Kierkegaard's (2013) terms, arises in us. Existential anxiety is the experience of dwelling in groundlessness, or 'the dizziness of freedom' (p. 61), that occurs when we recognize the power to choose and the demands and uncertainties it puts on us. We make our most important choices and commitments in situations where circumstances are never unambiguous and never immune to change. However, we feel tempted to believe that we stand on solid ground.

As Heidegger (Heidegger, 1957) points out, in our everyday mode of experiencing the world, we experience the world as a place where meaning already exists. We get absorbed in 'das Man' or the 'they,' the conventional meanings that describe our world, and the assumptions that we take as given about life that characterizes the society in which we live. However, existential anxiety is a mood that disrupts our involvement with the familiar signifiers of the world. It wipes away the intelligibility we take for granted, making us feel 'unhomeliness.' Anxiety, in this sense, wakes us up and calls us to establish our own voice and make an 'existential modification' of the shared meanings given to us through 'das Man' (Heidegger, 1957). Although in a different tradition, Heidegger's description of existential anxiety and the

'unhomely' aspects of experience is in many ways similar to what is described as the constructive possibilities of recognizing non-permanence" in Buddhism (Sikka, 2018).

When boundary conditions, ultimate concerns, 'groundlessness,' existential anxiety, or the recognition of non-permanence confronts us, we sense vulnerability rooted in our ontological condition. Here I will use the term 'existential vulnerability' to describe how these conditions frame the boundaries of our personal identities.

Defending against, and coping with, the pain of existential vulnerability

Yalom (1980) describes how we tend to apply defense mechanisms when existential anxiety arises. When defense mechanisms are characterized by rigidity, extensiveness, and overgeneralization, they often lead to maladaptive behavior and become part of psychological symptomatology (Cramer, 2015). However, the ways we try to avoid recognizing and relating to existential vulnerabilities are much broader than what we can meaningfully describe as psychopathology. We all sometimes blur the distinction between existential vulnerability given on an ontological level and contingent vulnerabilities. In this way, we create a confirmatory illusion of having control over existential vulnerabilities in the same way that we, to a certain degree, can have over the contingent ones. We can adopt a worldview that takes the sting out or makes us 'forget' them.

We can and should focus on living a healthy life to keep death at a distance. However, are not these attempts to influence the timing of our death often also ways we bargain to avoid thinking about death? Do they not also foster an illusion of control over death? A possible example of this is the overuse of medical procedures in Western societies, whereby, to an increasing degree, people receive treatments for potential risks (Brownlee et al., 2017).

Death is the prototype of all existential vulnerabilities, and this is an area where defenses are widely studied, especially within Terror Management Theory. This theory proposes that to manage terror engendered by awareness of mortality, humans invest in self-esteem and worldviews, which provide a sense of being significant beings in an enduring, meaningful world (Greenberg & Arndt, 2011). Several studies indicate that reminders of personal death can easily lure us into worldviews that promise some 'afterlife,' either in a religious sense or through making footprints in society that will outlive us (Solomon et al., 2015).

There are also many ways to defend ourselves from experiences of meaninglessness through activities that create pseudo-purpose. Addiction to overscheduling is a typical example. We can also escape experiences of aloneness through inauthentic ways of relating to others. A typical example

is to seek temporary relief by using others as merely an audience to get narcissistic self-affirmation (Morf & Rhodewalt). When we feel vulnerability as unmanageable insecurity, a rigid investment in a certain sense of self can result (Fonagy & Target, 2006). Through this, we can get addicted to admiration and affirmation of our self-worth from others (Baumeister & Vohs, 2001). As Erich Fromm (1941) described, we can also escape aloneness through conformity and 'mass-thinking' or turn on the 'hive switch,' as Jonathan Haidt (2012) tells it.

The line between healthy systems of belief and defenses is often ambiguous. Religion, values, and ideology can be valuable ways to give meaning and help us relate to existential vulnerability when paired with epistemic and ethical humility and awe. In this context, humility relates to the willingness to see oneself accurately and one's places in the world, acknowledge limitations and mistakes, and combine this with an openness to learn from others (Hill & Sandage, 2016; Tangney, 2009). Awe is a psychological state of experiencing vastness – recognizing something as larger than oneself and one's ordinary frame of reference and feeling a need to accommodate one's beliefs and knowledge structure to this (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Unfortunately, humility and awe are not the only possibilities. We can also seek religious or ideological certainty within some systems of belief or thought to fight ambiguity, groundlessness, and the anxiety it brings. Such attempts to escape unavoidable existential vulnerability may give temporary relief, but they reinforce insecurities and weaken personal identity in the longer run.

There is a continuity between coping mechanisms and defenses (Cramer, 2015). As Winnicott (1971) points out, for example, some illusions about omnipotence can be healthy when energizing and preparing us to expand. Therefore, some types of narcissism can benefit an adolescent's life (Hill & Lapsley, 2011). 'Fame, I am going to live forever, I am going to learn how to fly,' as sung by a young dancer in the classic movie *Fame*, is charming and appropriate in the given life situation. However, if a 50-year-old person sings these exact phrases, the charm suddenly begins to wane; it sounds more like a soundtrack for a story about stagnation and denial.

Existential strength

We can describe the ability to lean toward existential vulnerability and stay present with it, as a form of strength, in line with what Paul Tillich (2000) conceptualizes as a 'courage to be.' This courage is the act of taking the 'anxiety of nonbeing upon itself' (p. 155), an affirmation of life and fate and death, which belongs to life. Similarly, Nietzsche (2008) suggests that courage is the power of life to affirm itself, despite suffering and ambiguity. In his usual language of idealizations and devaluations, Nietzsche describes its

counterpart, the negation of life because of its negativity, as an expression of 'cowardice,' a widely used concept in which he included Christian morality.

Perhaps Heidegger (1957) shows more empathy with our tendency to turn our faces away from the 'unhomely' aspects of life and anxiety-provoking existential realities. He describes this as an ordinary state of 'fallenness' where we float around in the conventional conceptions of life, the 'they,' experiencing being at home in a foremost intelligible and easily understandable world. We are keeping our existential vulnerability at a distance from explicit awareness in this state. And with good reason. Everyday tasks, we can add, like going to the grocery store, or picking up children from kindergarten, are done best without an uncanny sense of existential awareness. However, one day one will buy one's last groceries, and hopefully, long before that, one will pick up one's child from kindergarten for the last time. Sometimes realizing this can be both painful and bittersweet, and bring you more deeply into the present, perhaps giving rise to gratitude – you are here, now, alive, doing your things (Vaillant, 2008). Victor Frankl (2004) suggested the term 'tragic optimism' describe the capacity to find meaning in life under any conditions, even those most miserable. Tragic optimism allows deriving from life's transitoriness an incentive to commit through responsible action. Paul Wong (Wong, Mayer, & Arslan, 2021) and proponents of existential positive psychology, similarly to Frankl and based on systematic empirical work, argue that proactive and transformative coping with stress and suffering can increase resilience and well-being.

At an ontological level, Heidegger (1996) uses the concept of 'resoluteness' to describe the authentic existential attitude of the self to itself, with an anticipatory and future-directed commitment to one's life. Resoluteness is the act of turning toward the realization that our lives as a whole, with activities like this included in them and many other engagements and responsibilities, are not infinite. When you turn toward death with resoluteness, you also 'free' yourself: 'one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factical possibilities lying ahead of' death (p. 308). This resoluteness opens up the possibility of authenticity, genuinely living one's own life (Tillich, 2000). It is widely recognized that Heidegger's ethical awareness in political matters was less than mediocre. We may regard the lack of explicit ethical reflexivity as a weakness in his thinking. However, his writings have rich ethical implications on a more implicit level (Hodge, 2012). So also, with the concept of resoluteness. Inspired by Heidegger, Paul Tillich's (2000) concept of 'courage' signals more of an explicit ethical stance.

The strength to face existential vulnerability can be seen as a prerequisite for personal growth and developing a mature sense of personal identity. The strength needed to relate to existential vulnerability may consist of both

resoluteness, ethical courage, and a stance of acceptance and active responsiveness toward existential experiences as they manifest on a situational and psychological level. We can see this strength as closely related to what I have described as 'existential health'—the ability to stay present with contrasting self-states and existential struggles, taking a proactive stance toward suffering as an unavoidable fact of life, rather than passively reacting to it (Binder, 2022).

Four vulnerable domains of personal identity

We can sort psychological approaches to personal identity according to their focus point or what they regard as sources of the experience of selfhood. Although different, these approaches do not need to be incompatible; personal identity can have several sources. Personal identity will have to do with creating meaning and the stories people tell about themselves and their lives. At the same time, human existence is fundamentally relational, and relationships certainly generate and shape the experiences of who we are. As a result of this relational being and personal choices, values and ideals are closely related to understanding who we are. Moreover, at a fundamental level, our bodies and emotions form core experiences of being.

These four domains of personal identity are both distinguishable and firmly related. Both narrative, value-based, and bodily aspects of identity are profoundly relational. Narratives are social constructions. Life stories can be dialogical because other people's voices and views are always implicit and explicit in the dominant themes and how we tell them. The values that become part of our self-definitions often do so because they get resonance 'inside' us. However, they are discovered and found outside the personal self, in socially shared narratives about what are essential goals and directions in lives, and through inspiring role models. An embodied sense of vitality and safety fundamentally depends on relationships with others. How we interpret and understand our bodies take shape through interactions with others. It also goes the other way around; emotional states that have their origin in bodily being will imprint on relationships, give resonance to values and ideals, and give rise to the type of lived experience that narratives try to capture.

Here, I will examine how existential vulnerabilities are at play in these four domains of identity and how existential courage and strength play a vital role in identity development.

Narrative identity and creation of meaning

As Jerome Bruner (1987) and Dan McAdams (1993, 2011) point out, the creation of personal identity is closely related to storytelling. Stories bring

the otherwise chaotic episodes of our lives into orderly patterns and wholes that make it possible to reflect upon them. These narratives shape how we look upon ourselves and our world, goals, and values; they direct our attention and structure our expectations. At the same time, our narrative identity needs to be flexible enough to be revised and reshaped as our life changes, and the vision we make of our future needs to upgrade. Paul Ricoeur (1991) points out that narrative identity must create idem – sameness—and simultaneously handle ipse – the changing self. As Heidegger (1957) describes, on an ontological level, we are temporal creatures, not merely living in time understood as something abstract or physical; we *are* the time that we live. We are always 'thrown' into a particular life situation, time, and place. In this situation, we relate to a past that we can interpret in many ways. We are also always projecting our existence into the future, and how we imagine our future projects will form and shape how we understand our pasts. Narrative identity gives meaning to time as a lived and personal experience. It is a medium for grasping our lifetime as a whole, although never a complete whole.

The undetermined and ambiguous aspects of life threaten our need for coherence and continuity in our life stories (Hirsh et al., 2012; Mar et al., 2013). Existential anxiety that arises from our groundlessness on an ontological level will challenge the structures of meaning we take for granted in life on a psychological level, including narrative coherence. Narrative coherence depends on whether a life story is understandable in a social context. As narrators, we must ensure that the story fulfills specific criteria such that it conveys the vicissitudes of human intention organized in time and follow structural expectations of goals and causalities (McAdams, 2006). The construction of a life story must also fulfill culturally dependent expectations of autobiographical coherence and follow the implicit understanding of typical events and their timing (Habermas & Bluck, 2000)

However, our identities do not have an 'essence' on the ontological or psychological levels; lived experience is not entirely coherent. Therefore, forcing too much coherence into a life story could also be an act of what Sartre (1992) describes as 'bad faith .' Hermans (1996) points out that we can compare a well-formed narrative to a polyphonic novel. Coherence is made and remade through the narrator's ability to synthesize the complex and shifting dialogue between the many voices in a self that are multivoiced and dialogic in its nature.

The courage to relate to existential dread can also depend on trust in this ability to remake narrative order. Coherence in life stories relates to psychological well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999). Certain types of storytelling are substantially associated with mental health: McAdams and colleagues (2001) describe these as "redemption stories". Such stories imply some painful crisis in life, challenging the plot that has given direction until then.

After recognizing and relating to the suffering inherent in such a situation, the person discovers a new path in life and a new sense of purpose. In such a plot, there are many possibilities of inauthenticity and the dangers of rose-colored views of life's challenges (McAdams, 2013). However, addressing and relating to the painful aspects of the turning point and emotional well-being go together; the mere 'positive' storytelling, where suffering and struggles are left out, is not associated with positive health outcomes (McAdams et al., 2001). A phase with confusion about which direction to take is necessary. We find a straightforward example of heightened existential awareness playing a role in the life stories connected with posttraumatic growth (Pals & McAdams, 2004). Discovering a new storyline in life after psychological trauma can involve a greater sense of purpose than one had in life before, even when symptoms of posttraumatic stress are part of this new life story.

Vulnerability rooted in our ontological condition not only challenges our narrative identities on a psychological level but may also stimulate them. The need to narrate appears when something new occurs, and we do not fully understand the implications. As Bruner (1991) points out, 'Trouble' is the engine of the drama. However, we also need a story when something breath-takingly good happens, like falling in love. Living implies having a life story that is still incomplete; being-toward-death is inevitably a part of narrative time (Paul Ricoeur, 1980). Deah could have completed our life story if it had not forced the narrator out. The sense of incompleteness stimulates our need to discover new possibilities, reorient, and sometimes redefine ourselves.

However, threats to meaning and order in life do not always stimulate growth. Both emotional pain and chaos can be overwhelming and give rise to what McAdams (2001) describes as "contamination stories ."These are not only stories where the plot turns from good to bad but also stories that stagnate; bad things tend to repeat themselves, and life experiences are composed as a rigid form of the 'same old story.' Nietzsche's dictum that 'what does not kill you makes you stronger' is not always true (Sudbrack et al., 2015). Often, trauma diminishes life and leaves people not feeling at home, neither in the world nor in their own lives (Stolorow, 2003). Trauma exposes us to our undetermined fate as something arbitrary and meaningless, and there is always a risk that trauma could leave us there.

Relationality and being with

Martin Buber (1970) points out that a sense of 'me' is only possible because there is a 'you.' Heidegger (1996) describes 'Being-with' as an ontological existential given. Personal identity is a relational phenomenon. Our self-definitions are contextual, made within a matrix of relationships where others confirm or deny aspects of who we are (Mitchell, 2000). Our self-experience will depend on whether they, for example, love, hate, admire,

despise, dominate, submit to, or neglect us. Others inform our possible identities through a multitude of ways of relating to us. Infants and toddlers build self-representations when caretakers interact with them. Children become able to create representations when there are qualities of curiosity and playfulness in these relationships (Fonagy & Target, 2007; Trevarthen, 2017). Our life stories are always relational. We cannot entirely create our life stories on our own; we also enter stories already there, told by others, in a culture with normative expectations of what a life and a life story should look like (Habermas & Reese, 2015).

As both Yalom (1980) and Winnicott (1958) point out, there is a vast difference between being left alone and willingly seeking solitude to stay present with one's way of experiencing the world. 'Being with,' as an ontological given, also makes aloneness possible. Solitude gets meaning in contrast to communion. There is always a part of personal experience that others cannot reach and define. Winnicott (1958) regards 'the capacity to be alone' as fundamental for developing personal identity. It describes a quality of positive aloneness associated with secure attachment. As Erich Fromm (1941) points out, relatedness to others is not identical to physical presence: 'An individual may be alone in a physical sense for many years and yet he may be related to ideas, values, or at least social patterns that give him a feeling of communion and "belonging."' (p. 17). On the other hand, awareness of separateness is an intrinsic part of being human. Awareness of separation without reunion through a bond of love awakes shame, guilt, and the deepest level of anxiety in humans (Fromm, 1956).

Entering meditative solitude may also put us at a distance from the definitions of what others make us; it also means to get in contact with a sense of personal freedom. A feeling of groundlessness can arise if one chooses to stay there for a while (Kornfield, 2017). We can cultivate these aspects of solitude in meditation retreats. An explicit goal is to loosen up 'self-stories' and enter a broader and more open sense of awareness of both self and world. Although often precious, even these kinds of self-chosen aloneness can become overwhelming and confusing. For some people, it can fragment their sense of self in unhealthy ways (Farias et al., 2020). Aloneness is never without risks; it exposes one to separation as an existential vulnerability.

According to Fromm (1941), isolation, loss of communion, and 'moral aloneness' will disintegrate personal identity. These situations give rise to experiences of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and insignificance. The threat of isolation is a threat to our deepest existential needs. It can lead humans to give up their personal sense of identity and seek 'escape from freedom' through authoritarianism, destructiveness, or conformity. Also, empirical studies of loneliness indicate disruptive effects: Being ostracized is

extremely painful (Rudert et al., 2020) and can lead to a breakdown in self-regulation (Baumeister et al., 2005).

Personal identity depends on relationships with others in a way that always puts it at risk. Loneliness and separation is not the only way that relationality makes our identities existentially vulnerable. The power of others to define our identities through how they interpret who we are can also do so. Sartre (1989) alluded to this through the phrase 'hell is the others'; we tend to judge ourselves the same way other people judge us. As Heidegger (1957) points out, at an ontological level, we always find ourselves already arbitrarily 'thrown' into the contexts of our lives. What type of relational matrix we are thrown into, which gives rise to our first self-definition, is fate, not a choice. Later, we make choices regarding what type of meaning and storylines we will make out of it (Schafer, 1992). The way our actions are interpreted and used within the framework of other people's lives are, at the same time, fundamentally out of our control and vital for our sense of self. In the same way as there are experiences in ourselves that others cannot reach, there is a kernel of experience in others, including their understanding of ourselves, that we never can fully know or control. We know that our close relationships become part of our most profound experience of who we are (Mitchell, 2003). Therefore, we carefully choose whom we let into this intimate zone.

Values and ideals

Erik H. Erikson (1968) regarded moral development as a core of identity and suggested that a capacity for ethical judgment is the 'true criterion of identity' (p. 39). According to Erikson, identity matures through stages. At earlier stages of childhood, moral and adolescent 'ideologism,' and personal reflexivity over ethical matters is still in their making. At these stages, judgments tend to be absolutist. Also, at later stages, there is always a danger that ethical judgments 'regress' to mere ritualizations like moralism, totalism, and authoritarianism. However, moral and ideological considerations will be involved in mature ethical judgment.

The concept of 'identity crisis' is central to Erikson's approach: these are periods where values and choices are reevaluated and reexamined, especially in connection with adolescence, but not exclusively so. According to Erikson's (1963) theory and James Marcia's (Kroger et al., 2011; Marcia, 1966), systematization and empirical studies based on this theoretical approach, exploration, and commitment are two central aspects of identity development. Commitment without exploration ('identity foreclosure') often (but not necessarily) will be followed by an identity crisis, or what might be called a period of exploration and not (yet) commitment. Then,

when things go well, this will be followed by personal identity achieved with both commitment and continued exploration.

Erikson's's (1963) approach has features that might seem essentialist. Development is often described in organismic terms. However, an underlying theme in Erikson and Marcia's approach is that we are never to achieve either moral or epistemic certainty. The world is fundamentally ambiguous, and an identity crisis and a moratorium period mean truly facing this ambiguity. A genuine commitment to values is something one takes under heightened existential awareness of vulnerability conditions. Erikson's existential premise seems not far from what Erich Fromm (1947) describes: 'If [man] faces the truth without panic, he will recognize that there is no meaning in life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers by living productively' (p. 53).

In connection with his concept of 'identity style,' Berzonsky (2004) explicitly examines this epistemological dimension of examining and making value commitments. Berzonsky focuses on the process of gathering information relevant to identity and describes an 'informational,' a 'normative,' and a 'diffuse-avoidant' style. Persons with an informational style are active seekers of information, ready to reevaluate knowledge relevant to ideas of who they are. They operate with an epistemology where they recognize and tolerate ambiguity and chose values without any certainty other than the orderliness and structure that commitments create. Persons with a normative style often adopt the values of others, mostly from their family of origin. They live in a world with a more fixed and mechanistic epistemology; they tend to see reality as objective, reliable, and deterministic. The person with a diffuse style avoids examining alternatives and tends to avoid commitment. Simultaneously, this person lives with an epistemology not very different from the person with the informational one but is unable to handle it; the world is seen as chaotic, with a multiplicity of options that provide a limited basis for legitimate certainty or rational judgments. Perhaps as a defense against such threatening chaos, they can view who they are as predetermined by fate or factors beyond their control (Berzonsky, 1994). The diffuse style is associated with poorer psychological health; informational and normative styles are associated with psychological well-being (Berzonsky, 2003).

In the normative style, similar to what Erikson and Marcia describe as 'identity foreclosure,' the explorative part is weak. The normative style and foreclosure are associated with higher scores on cognitive closedness and authoritarianism (Miklikowska, 2012; Ryeng et al., 2013). Does this indicate that these ways of building personal identity necessarily are defensive regarding existential vulnerability? Defensive motives are certainly possible for some persons with these styles and statuses. The informational style, with a willingness to explore and reevaluate values and self-definitions on a

psychological level, can appear to be a more non-defensive way of relating to groundlessness and existential anxiety. However, exploration is also a cultural norm and something that we expect from adolescents in Western middle-class culture. It is difficult to know whether a person's actions and choices grow out of existential awareness or are due to cultural contingencies. As David Goodhart (2017) points out, there is also a cultural conflict in Western societies between 'somewheres' who seek to belong to their place of birth and commitment to traditional values and 'anywheres' with more global identities who value exploration, change, and diversity of norms. Perhaps a person with a 'somewhere' type of identity can commit to tradition through a more silent and subtle type of 'existential modification' of shared meanings and values. Both an authentic courage to commit and authentic courage to explore depend upon recognizing and relating to existential vulnerability.

Embodiment and emotionality

Nietzsche (2008) describes how he thinks the 'wills' that bring direction in life have their origin in our bodily existence: '[b]ehind your thoughts and feelings . . . there stands a mighty commander, an unknown wise man – his name is Self. In our body he dwells' (p. 30). Sigmund Freud (1989) also described a bodily component of identity developing from the id. However, in Freudian theory, the experiential dimension of bodily being is not deeply explored. Within a phenomenological framework, Merleau-Ponty (1962) points out how our being in the world is embodied, and we are to regard embodiment as an ontological given. Our sense of agency in the world has a bodily base, although, on the psychological level, mainly pre-reflectively. Eugene Gendlin (1992;1997) discusses how this embodied mode of being produces a felt sense of emotional meaning. Our embodied and emotional being has both a proactive and receptive side – strength and agency on the one side and vulnerability and receptivity on the other (Binder, 2022).

How do we understand the developmental underpinnings of this bodily aspect of identity? Moreover, how might existential vulnerabilities play a role in this developmental process? Donald Winnicott (1954;1960) explores how the essential components of identity are based on bodily experience with roots in infancy and early childhood. At an early stage, vulnerability is dominant, and psychological strength depends on the relational context, the 'holding environment' of care, and bodily modulated empathy. When the holding environment offers continuity, the infant experiences a sense of 'going on being,' an inner continuity combined with a sense of living in a predictable and safe world and a sense of 'aliveness.' We can see this sense of bodily continuity and vitality as a fundamental constituent of personal identity.

Similarly, based on a more systematic empirical research base, Daniel Stern (2018) describes how a 'core self' develops in early infancy based on bodily sensations and interactions with caregivers. This core self is a pre-linguistic sense of self that is part of mature self-experience. Language transforms self-experience, and narrative capacities make new intersubjective sharing and identity building possible. However, a felt sense of continuity and bodily being – or lack thereof – will always be part of personal identity. Our bodies will continue to be at the center of our emotional being in the world; all experience also comprises a felt sense of bodily meaning (Gendlin, 1992; Ratcliffe, 2009).

Bodily identity reminds us of death as the ultimate existential vulnerability on an ontological level. Terror Management Theory explores, on a psychological level, how the body and bodily processes easily become associated with death (Solomon et al., 2015). When something reminds us that we are mortal, we prefer 'soul' over the body and romantic and 'eternal' love over simple bodily pleasures. Our bodily identity hinders us from living like gods, and distancing ourselves from bodily realities can be experienced as steps to being god-like.

We see bodily and relational vulnerability as firmly woven together from a developmental perspective. Our emotional being, wishes, and needs make us vulnerable to fate and relational events out of our control. Although not identical, emotional suffering and bodily pain are strongly related phenomena at experiential and physiological levels (MacDonald & Leary, 2005). Winnicott describes how personal identity can be disturbed when traumatic 'impingements' and unpredictability in the holding environment threaten this sense of continuity. Such traumas and disruptions can result in defensive identity configurations based on an intellectual rather than a bodily level, such as the 'false self,' with a sense of 'not feeling real,' a lack of vitality, and the experience of meaninglessness (WInnicott, 1965a).

The meaning of our bodily existence is always, to some extent, at the mercy of others. Embodiment and relationality are ontological givens strongly related on a psychological level. Bodily being makes us vulnerable to the evaluative 'gaze' of others that Sartre (1992) describes, a type of looking that easily makes us fixed as definitions of who we are and which enforces power upon us. At a personal level, we tend never to forget when someone signals that some aspects of our bodies are ugly or not up to standard in other ways. Collective identities, to varying extents, also get into our self-definition and identity. Prejudices and power structures connected with gender, race, and disability are contingencies that can make us painfully aware of the existentially vulnerable borders of our identities.

The relationship between the existential and contingent conditions reexamined

We cannot always easily distinguish existential vulnerabilities that are part of the ontological structure of life and contingent vulnerabilities due to social and psychological context. The early developmental roots of personal identity are an example of this. An infant or a young child depends on caregivers' actual behavior regarding essential experiences of meaning, being alone and together, emotionality, and the implicit felt sense of continuity and 'groundedness' in the body. Physiological functioning of the nervous system and inherited temperamental traits will naturally also color our experiences sorted within the existential domain, such as relating to others, meaning-making and creativity, and how we senses bodily continuity and coherence.

What we might see as essentialist traits in descriptions of early development might also be read as a context or 'facticity' of psychological development. We never cease to be psychobiological organisms. As Rollo May (1960) points out, even when a characteristic of our nature as humans are to create ourselves, 'the further question is raised of how such a power is possible and how it must be structured' we must have knowledge about body and mind; 'questions which for millennia have been discussed in essentialist terms' (p. 13). A critical contextual and psychological factor when facing existential vulnerability with origin in our ontological condition is a sense of what Erikson's's (1963) would describe as 'basic trust' and what Sandler (1960) describes as a 'background of safety.' These phenomena will, to a certain degree, depend upon secure attachment and a functioning nervous system.

We will always experience existential conditions within the context of contingent ones. I have discussed how the blurring between existential and contingent vulnerabilities sometimes is defensive, making existential contingencies appear more manageable. However, it is also important to point out that defensiveness will also go in the other direction, especially regarding social identities. Fromm (1947) pointed out how confusion between existential and historical conditions in a specific epoch can serve the interest of dominant groups that 'were interested in upholding the historical contradictions' and "eager to prove that they were existential dichotomies and thus unalterable: 'They tried to convince man that "what must not be cannot be" and that he had to resign himself to the acceptance of his tragic fate' (p. 31). There are countless examples of how groups in power make economic, gender, ethnic, or racial injustices look like an existentially 'given' part of the human condition.

Heidegger (1957) describes 'thrownness' as one of our ontological givens; circumstances outside our control frame our lives. We become who we are within a context of historical and psychobiological circumstances that we have not chosen, often with a lot that we wish were otherwise. In this way, our thrownness is also part of our existential vulnerability. However, recognizing

and being able to give meaning to these circumstances, and balance the humility that insight into existential vulnerability gives rise to with courage to make choices and act, is the kernel of authentic personal identity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how personal identity on a psychological level can be formed and shaped by how a person relates to existential vulnerability with origin on an ontological level. In this context, 'existential' refers to the experiential dimension of concerns and conditions that intrinsically belong to being human, such as death and finitude, freedom, and responsibility, need for meaning, and relational and embodied being. I have examined how vulnerability plays different roles within narrative and value-based identity-formations and relational and bodily domains. The strength of narrative and value-based identity depends on how a person relates to finitude and the ambiguous side of lived experience. The strength of relational identity depends on how a person relates to existential aloneness and the fact that the meaning and value of our actions are partly out of our control; they are always also dependent on other people's responses to us. We can see bodily identity as a fundamental for the other domains that, when things go well, make us feel continuous and real. At the same time, bodily being make us vulnerable to death and the gaze and actions of others. As existential vulnerabilities always play out in specific psychobiological and historical contexts, the distinction between existential and situational vulnerabilities cannot be absolute. Choices and acts based on awareness of these contexts of our lives, and insight into the existential vulnerability inherent in it, can be seen as the kernel of authentic personal identity.

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