THOUGHTS ON 'AUTHENTICITY'

- Authenticity, as commonly conceived, appears to suppose the existence within each of us of an *authentic* self – within a more *general* self – to which we can be either true or false. Is this not a *myth* – a ghost *within* the ghost in the machine?
- The degree of integration or diffusion of personality varies widely and is reflected in consistency of self-image and behaviour.[1] The more consistent and predictable our behaviour the more we can talk about our 'normal' (authentic?) selves. However, self-image and behaviour is affected by the reactions of other people and in different social situations we may project different personas. A *popular* use of the word 'authentic' is to describe individuals who, supposedly, do not put on different 'shows' for different people and always present the 'real deal' (i.e. 'what you see is what you get').
- Human personality is a mishmash of elements – good, bad and indifferent. The nastier aspects are just as *real*, and in that sense *authentic*, as the nicer. If someone is authentically *bad*, is it necessarily a good idea to encourage them (perhaps a Hitler or a Savile) to act authentically and be 'true to themselves'?
- Authenticity is a 'feel-good' word which encourages us to commit the 'genitive fallacy' of judging actions by their provenance rather than their substance. The extent to which an action of mine is freely chosen by me, and thus an authentic expression of myself, is *irrelevant* to any judgement about its rightness or wrongness. It will, of course, be relevant to a judgement about *me* including the extent to which I merit praise or blame and, if the action is deemed criminal, about my appropriate 'treatment' (which is also likely to take into account my mental state at the time and the extent to which I acted 'in or out of character').
- Although lumbered with much of our personas, significant aspects of them can and do change over time. Which, if any, is then our *authentic* self? Can we be true only to today's, not yesterday's or tomorrow's, self?
- Even if our personalities remain much the same, our *emotional states* are subject to periodic and sometimes rapid change (e.g. from composure to anger). Which are then our *authentic* emotions? At any moment, can we be true only to an *instantaneous* self?
- If our authentic self is subject to *change* what implications does this have for making *promises* to others, given that our future selves may not wish to keep them? Might this explain the existential angst felt by some who contemplate the taking of marriage vows?
- Insisting (in my view rightly) that we exist as unique individuals, not as expressions of some overarching Hegelian World Spirit, and rejecting (also in my view rightly) 'external' moral constraints such as Kantian ''categorical imperatives', Aristotelian 'virtues' or the words of some putative 'God', still leaves unresolved the question of what should be the basis for our individual and collaborative decision-making. Can individual 'gut-feelings' (however 'authentic' they may be) provide the basis for anything more than a 'boo-

[1] "At one extreme are the completely dedicated and single-minded fanatics, at the other are those adolescents who do not yet know 'who they are or where they are going'. The more integrated the self-image, the more consistent a person's behaviour will be: one effect of the self-image on behaviour is the suppression of behaviour that is out of line. This 'consistency' may take various forms, depending on whether the self-image is based on the attributes of some person, or on a set of ethical or ideological rules of conduct, or on an occupational or social-class role".
Michael Argyle. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*. Penguin, 4th Edition, 1988

hooray' type of morality? Can a workable approach to life really be based on the principle "if it feels right, do it"?

- An external constraint which each individual *cannot* ignore is the existence of *other* individuals. Factually, we are *social* animals and many of our most important choices are made *not* as isolated individuals but in *collaboration* with other people (including partners, family members and fellow citizens). This inevitably involves making *compromises*. How do we reconcile such compromising with being individually 'authentic'?
- Any moral choice, worthy of the name, appears to require the application of a *combination* of emotion and reason to the imagined consequences, for ourselves and others, of alternative courses of action. Whilst having to *consider* the thoughts and feelings of others, however, any final choice we make requires the use of our *own* judgement. *Abandoning* such judgement and deferring instead to someone else's (perhaps to some 'authority figure') could be seen as a failure to exercise authenticity.
- Does then belief in a God to whom we *defer* for moral guidance debar us from authenticity? To be authentic must we not insist that *we* individually have to decide in the end what is right or wrong, never mind what any God says? There are, of course, people who believe in a God but who *also* consider themselves existentialists (the concept of authenticity being closely associated with existentialism). The compatibility of existentialism with belief in a divine authority figure (a key feature of monotheistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam), however, remains highly problematic (see my note on the story of Abraham and Isaac).
- Whilst atheist existentialists such as Sartre – unlike religious existentialists such as Kierkegaard – are spared the problem of reconciling deference to a God with personal authenticity, *both* are faced with the problem of *other people*, all of whom, it must be assumed, possess an equal *potential* for authenticity. The temptation is to suppose that most of them, by being slaves to 'convention', fail to *exercise* such potential and can be written off as 'the public', 'the crowd' or 'the herd'. Breathtaking in its arrogance (somehow it's always *others*, never *ourselves*, who belong to the herd!), such a manoeuvre *falsely* divides humanity into, on the one hand, an elite of independently-minded 'free spirits' immune to external pressures and influences and, on the other hand, an amorphous mass of suggestible and gullible 'followers'.
- Nietzsche, an unabashed elitist and self-styled 'moral naturalist', differentiates people upon the basis of the natural *human instincts* they display. On the one hand, he believes, are the 'life-affirming' instincts for spontaneity and creativity and, on the other, the 'life-stultifying' instincts for conformity and rationalisation. For Nietzsche, the former are exemplified by the warrior culture of a mythologised pre-Socratic Greece and the latter by the 'other-worldly' ethos of Western philosophy and religion (especially Christianity with its 'slave morality'). If human instincts are equally *natural*, however, are they not equally *authentic*? If we have nothing but our own instincts to guide us, on what basis can we settle disagreements about which ones are 'life-affirming' and which ones 'life-stultifying'? Some of us, for example, would wish to include the instinct for *empathising* and *co-operating* with others in the life-affirming category.
- For Kierkegaard, a very unorthodox Christian, 'life-affirmation' was all about discovering his own personal route to God, the direction of his search being essentially *inwards*. If being authentic involves being 'true to oneself', then the search for authenticity does appear inward-looking, self-regarding and potentially narcissistic. It is quite likely to be

coupled with a disengagement from the messy world of other people and disdain for their attempts to improve it – as was the case with the introspective and angst-ridden sociopath Kierkegaard[2].

- From birth onwards, our thought patterns and personalities have been shaped by all sorts of external factors, the cognitive systems realised within our brains (our *minds*) being the product of *interaction* with our environment and particularly with other people. *If* being authentic requires us to be true to a self unsullied by such contact and to be free, when making choices, from any external influence or pressure, then authenticity appears unachievable. Sartre, whilst accepting that our present selves incorporate the totality of our accumulated experience (he calls this our *facticity*, Heidegger using the same word), argues that our consciousnesses remain free to *transcend* facticity (he thus labels such power *transcendence*, equivalent to Heidegger's *Existenz*) and thereby to determine whom we *become*. Failure to exercise the power of transcendence constitutes, for Sartre, a form of betrayal (which he calls *bad faith*, equivalent to Heidegger's *fallenness*) resulting in *inauthentic* behaviour. Much about Sartre's formulation is obscure, particularly the nature of consciousness (which he likens to 'a wind, blowing from nowhere toward everything') and how consciousness, an uncaused 'Being-*for*-itself', can, through human choices and actions, 'negate' (i.e. cause to be different) a causally deterministic world possessing 'Being-*in*-itself'.[3] Crucially, the *practical applicability* of Sartre's formulation can be questioned. How, in practice, could the *source* (facticity or transcendence) of any human choice or action be identified? Even if it could be identified, no moral conclusions follow. If we are to avoid committing the genitive fallacy, we must judge the rightness/wrongness of choices and actions by their *content* and *consequences*, not by their *source*. If Heidegger's conversion to Nazism, for example, constituted an act of 'transcendence' does that make it *right*?
- Human *intercommunication* creates and maintains a *social and institutional world* that embodies complex patterns of beliefs, attitudes and behaviour and includes phenomena such as ownership, marriage, money and government. Existing only in our heads, this world is inherently fragile and open to challenge and change. Particularly open to challenge are the 'mental monsters' we create by lumping individuals together into amorphous *masses* (based perhaps on gender, race, nationality or class) which we then

[2] "Like Rousseau, Kierkegaard turned his own resentment and anti-social nature into a spectacularly individual and appealing brand of self-righteousness and inner integrity. But unlike Rousseau he had no plans to change the world; indeed, any such 'big picture' seemed to him quite irrelevant and unappealing. When revolutions broke out through Europe in 1848, Kierkegaard was only a snide observer. He found such uprisings pointless and ridiculous, just another manifestation of 'the Public'."
Robert C. Solomon. *Continental Philosophy since 1745: The Rise and Fall of the Self.* OUP, 1988

[3] "Sartre divided his 'phenomenological ontology' into two forms of Being†, which he calls (after Hegel) 'for itself' and 'in itself', the former the being of consciousness, the latter the being of things in the world… [He accepted] Descartes' basic model of a free and rational consciousness set against a mechanical, physical world… Consciousness is utterly empty. It has no 'contents'. It is not an object of any kind (accordingly it is not subject to physical laws, such as the law of causation). It exists only in its awareness of itself and the world. This is the basis of its freedom, but also the source of its dilemma: it is nothing but wants to be something. It always 'is what it is not, and is not what it is'." Robert C. Solomon [Ibid.]
† Sartre, in fact, distinguishes a third form of 'Being' i.e. 'Being-for-others'. The images *others* have of us pose a threat to our own *self*-images and thus to our own freedom. Reminiscent of Hegel's 'master-slave' relationship, we strive for others to see us as we see ourselves. Failing this, we try to 'reduce' other people to *objects* ('Beings-*in*-themselves') who can be ignored. For Sartre, *conflict* appears to characterise inter-personal relations. In his play *Huis Clos (No Exit)* (1944), one of his characters declares "Hell is other people".

treat as *unitary beings*, the ultimate monster being the Hegelian 'World Spirit' that subsumes us all. We create another set of monsters by believing that the products of our own imaginations (e.g. gods, souls, spirits and Platonic 'forms') actually exist. To be seduced by these monsters and let them govern the way we conduct ourselves in the world, it could be argued, is to base our lives on *untruths* and thus to live *inauthentically*.

- When fighting our mental monsters our greatest weapon is our capacity to combine emotional and aesthetic sensibility with *reason*. This includes our ability to *compare* and *contrast*, to identify *similarities* and *differences*, to *generalise* (without losing sight of individual differences), to *discriminate* between fact and value and to make judgements and decisions based on the application of *clear and consistent criteria*, not the arbitrary exercise of gut feeling. Bizarrely, 'being authentic' is sometimes equated with being spontaneous and improvisational, in *denial* of the exercise of reason. Our capacity for *rationality* is one of the most important things about us and to deny its crucial role in human decision-making is to be 'inauthentic' to our own true natures. The existentialist philosopher Solomon (see footnote 2) has argued that emotions, (unlike, for example, toothaches) are *intentional* phenomena, the *rationality* of which can be judged. We can and do judge whether particular expressions of emotion are rational or irrational (e.g. whether a fear is justified by awareness of a genuine danger or whether it constitutes a *phobia*). We attack xenophobes, homophobes and the like by demonstrating, through *rational argument* and *evidence*, that their hatreds are based on *untruths* (in the case of Hitler, for example, that his claimed 'Jewish conspiracy' had no basis in *fact* and reflected solely the prejudices of his own twisted mind).
- Sometimes, after applying all our rational, emotional and aesthetic intelligence to making a choice – such as how to vote in an election or what to select from a restaurant menu – we are left with two or more *equally* preferable options. Any *final* choice we make (assuming we don't 'bottle it' and defer or abandon a decision) might then be seen as an archetypal 'act of transcendence' – a unique expression of a 'Being-for-itself'. But this is to make transcendence an essentially *arbitrary* and *random* force[4] (and to elevate absurdly the existential status of something as trivial as plumping for the beef steak rather than the roast duck). Where there is genuinely '*nothing* to choose' between two or more alternatives, whatever final choice is made must be *random* – not even a leap of faith but at best a leap of *hope*, which we may or may not subsequently regret.[5]
- Although choices arise in connection with *particular* situations, the recognition of similarities and differences between these allows the identification of *universal* principles that are applicable in other situations where the *relevant conditions* pertain. Existentialism has been *misinterpreted* by some as implying that the particularity of each situation means that an *isolated* choice, uninformed by any other, has to be made in each individual case. The moral philosopher Richard Hare points out the absurdity of this interpretation.[6]

[4] Schopenhauer (1788-1860), the 'philosopher of pessimism', hypothesises the existence of an irrational, impersonal and ineluctable cosmic force or 'Will' which determines our individual desires and emotions and renders absurd any attempts by us to direct the course of our lives through rational choice.

[5] Samuel Johnson (1709-84) is reported to have described the choice of a widower, following an unhappy marriage, to re-marry as "the triumph of hope over experience".

[6] "If some British admirers of the Existentialists were to be followed … we should say to ourselves that people, and the situations in which they find themselves, are unique, and that therefore we must approach every new situation with a completely open mind and do our moral thinking *ab initio*. This is an absurd prescription, only made plausible by concentrating our attention, by means of novels and short stories, on moral situations of

- Sartre illustrates the irrelevance to moral choice of *externally-imposed* universal rules or principles (dictated, for example, by 'categorical imperatives', 'virtues' or 'the words of God') with the moral dilemma of a young man in Nazi-occupied France deciding whether to join the Free French or to stay at home and look after his widowed mother. Sartre is *not* arguing, however, that in making what are authentically our own choices in such situations we do not develop and *universalize* our *own* rules or principles (albeit ones that we may revise or refine in the light of fresh experience).[7]
- The exercise of *individual* judgement for which we are held *individually* accountable is arguably the only *coherent* basis for moral choice. It requires the *imaginative* and *combined* application of rational, emotional and aesthetic intelligence – in contrast to following imposed rules, obeying orders or 'winging it' on the basis of gut feelings. In the process, principles applicable to *like situations* are identified so that our moral judgements are expressed in the form of *universalizable prescriptive statements*. Different people, of course, may make very different judgements. The more we engage in free and open debate, the more such differences can be resolved or at least minimised. In the end, however, we each have to make up our own minds and potentially insist, even if in a minority of one, "I am right and everyone else is wrong". In *this sense*, we each assert our individual authenticity by being a moral *absolutist*.[8] This does not, of course, justify *imposing* our judgements on others. Since we do not live as isolated individuals, however, *some* system for making and enforcing *collective* choices is unavoidable. The *limited* surrender of personal freedom (and thus how we express ourselves in our *actions*), appears the inevitable price of living and co-operating with other people.

Roger Jennings
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extreme difficulty and complexity, which really do require a lot of consideration. It is important to realise that there are moral problems of this kind; but if *all* moral questions were treated like this, not only should we never get round to considering more than the first few that we happened to encounter, but any kind of moral development or learning from experience would be quite impossible. What the wiser among us do is to think deeply about the crucial moral questions, especially those that face us in our own lives; but when we have arrived at an answer to a particular problem, to crystallise it into a not too specific or detailed form, so that its salient features may stand out and serve us again in a like situation without need for *so much* thought. We may then have time to think about *other* problems, and shall not continually be finding ourselves at a loss about what we ought to do." R.M. Hare. *Freedom and Reason*. Oxford University Press, 1963

[7] "Sartre uses the example in order to make the point that in such cases no antecedently 'existing' principle can be appealed to. We have to consider the particular case and make up our minds what are its relevant features, and what, taking these features into account, ought to be done in such a case. Nevertheless, when we do make up our minds, it is about a matter of principle which has a bearing outside the particular case. Sartre is as much of a universalist as I am… He has also on occasion given his public support to universal moral principles." R.M Hare [Ibid.]

"I bear the responsibility of the choice which, in committing myself, also commits the whole of humanity… In this sense we may say that there is a human universality, but it is not something given; it is being perpetually made." Jean-Paul Sartre. *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme* (1946)

[8] But a *humble* absolutist, always prepared to consider the views of others, re-consider our own views and, if justified, *change our minds* – see my paper *'Moral Certainty or Moral Relativism*?*'* on the KPC website.

A note on the story of Abraham and Isaac

In *Fear and Trembling* (1843) Kierkegaard (writing as 'Johannes de Silentio') finds significance in the Biblical story (Genesis 22) of Abraham's attempt, as instructed by God, to make a burnt offering of his only son Isaac. Just as he is about to cut his son's throat his hand is stayed by an angel who informs him that, by proving his fear of God, he and his descendents will be forever blessed. Before considering what 'moral' can be drawn from this story, it is worth reminding ourselves, courtesy of Rembrandt, of the true enormity of what Abraham was about to do.

Rembrandt's 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' (1635)

Kierkegaard *appears*[9] to infer from the story that, for believers in God such as himself, 'self-realisation' can entail blind leaps of faith, even when these conflict totally with deeply felt desires or duties. Philosopher of religion Mark C. Taylor interprets Kierkegaard as follows. "The Abrahamic God is the all-powerful Lord and Master who demands nothing less than the total obedience of his faithful servants. The transcendent otherness of God creates a possibility of a collision between religious commitment and the individual's personal desire and moral duty. Should such a conflict develop, the faithful self must follow Abraham in forgoing desire and suspending duty – even if this means sacrificing one's own son or forsaking one's beloved. The Absolute Paradox occasions an absolute decision by posing the absolute either/or. Either believe or be offended. From the Christian perspective, this crucial decision is of eternal significance."[10]

Surely, here lies madness! Simply as a *human*, let alone a parent, Abraham's *whole being* must cry out against the killing of his son. The *only* way he can express his selfhood is to declare "I will *not* do it and I *reject* any being that calls upon me to do so!" He must also declare "my son is as much a *free agent* as I am, not an *object* or *possession* of mine to be used for my own purposes, such as to curry favour with God! To kill him would be to deny *his* selfhood!"

Let us be clear. Abraham is torn not between God and any external morality imposed by 'society' but between God and everything that his *own emotive and rational self* proclaims. To reject the latter and, on the basis of *blind faith*, do something that is repugnant to his whole nature is surely to display a complete *lack of authenticity* and thus *bad faith*. To portray acting against one's own inclinations as affirming, in some bizarre way, one's 'freedom from oneself' is simply incoherent. Abandoning one's own judgement for arbitrary leaps of faith, however, appears unavoidable for those who believe, like Kierkegaard, in a God who tells us how we should live. We then descend rapidly into incoherent talk of 'the Absolute Paradox' and similar gobbledegook.

The issues raised by the story of Abraham and Isaac are relevant *now*. Some parents, although mercifully few, kill their children because they believe them possessed by devils. Some possibly claim to have heard, like Abraham, the voice of God. If Abraham's story were acted out today, his hand being stayed perhaps by a family member rather than an angel, he would be charged with attempted murder, probably deemed insane and committed to a mental asylum. Only the maddest of defence lawyers would seek to defend him on the grounds that he was just trying to exert his 'individual authenticity', break free from the constraints imposed by 'conventional morality' or resolve the 'Absolute Paradox' resulting from 'the transcendent otherness of God'.

Currently the madness that stems from blind faith in the imagined wishes of an imagined God is being conspicuously displayed in the Middle East. No doubt those who are cutting other people's throats (sadly no angels appearing to stay their hands) would claim that they, like Abraham, are acting in the name of God. In the name of sanity we must insist that the *only* basis for moral choice is the exercise of individual judgement for which each of us is held individually accountable. No 'God excuse' will be accepted.

Roger Jennings April 2015

[9] Ambiguity abounds in Kierkegaard's writing, his use of many pseudonyms raising the question which, if any, of these alter-egos represents his *authentic* self?

[10] *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*. Fordham University Press, 2000

A few oddments

Feeling *separate* and *different* from other people has an allure, particularly in our teens and early twenties when we are perhaps most susceptible to introspection and self-absorption. In solitude we are at liberty to cultivate our self-images and massage our egos unchallenged by the perspectives of others. The mind-set is encapsulated in the Simon and Garfunkel song *I am a Rock* (released in 1966 as a single and also on their *Sounds of Silence* album).

"I have no need of friendship
Friendship causes pain.
It's laughter and it's loving I disdain…
I have my books
And my poetry to protect me.
I am shielded in my armour.
Hiding in my room,
Safe within my womb,
I touch no one and no one touches me.
I am a rock, I am an island…"

The song first appeared in 1965 on *The Paul Simon Songbook*. A comment on its liner notes by Simon highlights the issue for 'authenticity' raised by *personal development* over time i.e. which is then our *authentic* self and can we be true only to *today's* self?

"This L.P. contains twelve of the songs that I have written over the past two years. There are some here that I would not write today. I don't believe in them as I once did. I have included them because they played an important role in the transition. It is discomforting, almost painful, to look back over something someone else created and realize that someone else was you. I am not ashamed of where I've been and what I've thought. It's just not me anymore. It is perfectly clear to me that the songs I write today will not be mine tomorrow. I don't regret the loss."

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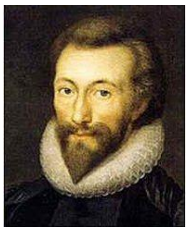
John Donne (1572-1631)



"No man is an island
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main...
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee."

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions: Meditation XVII (1624)

Apart from providing Ernest Hemingway with the title for a novel, Donne's poem emphasises (in contrast to the sentiments of *I am a Rock*) the *interconnectedness* of people. In a similar vein, the philosopher David Hume (1711-76) comments "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathise with others and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own." [*A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1739]

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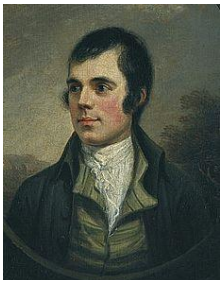
"O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us
An ev'n Devotion."

To a Louse, On Seeing One on a Lady's Bonnet at Church (1786)

Robert Burns (1759-96)



For Sartre, how other people see us *threatens o*ur self-images. Burns, however, reminds us that our self-images can be *false* and cause us to behave foolishly. Other people's perspectives may provide useful correctives, enabling us to change how we regard ourselves and to adapt our behaviour accordingly. Philosopher Gilbert Ryle points out that "there is no contradiction in asserting that someone might fail to recognise his frame of mind for what it is" and that people might "deceive themselves about their own motives". [*The Concept of Mind*. 1949]

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If our egos and self-images are *part* of our facticity (to use Sartre's terminology), exercising transcendence appears to require us to *overcome* them. Gautama Buddha said "Happy is he who has overcome his ego … who has obtained peace… who has found the truth" and linked this with the abandonment of desire and willing. Without desire and willing, however, there appears to be no basis for acting as *agents* in the world. Making choices means deciding what we *want*, both for ourselves and others. Our wants are influenced by the content of our shared social and institutional world. Existing only in our heads, this is inherently fragile and open to challenge and change. By thinking differently we alter it, for better or worse. By slaying our self-created 'mental monsters' –which include 'gods' (to be placated) and 'souls' (to be redeemed) – we start to live authentically. Rejecting 'belief' as evidence for anything, we can focus upon enabling each person to have a *satisfying* life, with the freedom (consistent with a like freedom for others) to interpret and achieve this in her or his own way. Problems arise when we cultivate beliefs which we then seek to impose upon others – as that unsung philosopher Reginald Perrin argued in his drunken speech (*"Are We Getting Our Just Desserts?"*) delivered at the British Fruit Federation's Bilberry Hall.

"But what do *you* believe in?" I hear you ask. Do I hear you ask? Well I'll tell you anyway: I know that I don't know. I believe in not believing. You see, for every man who believes something, there's somebody who believes the opposite. What's the point? How many wars would have been fought, how many people would have been tortured had nobody ever believed in anything? Have you ever heard of 'The Wars of the Apathetic'? Or 'the Persecution of the Apathetic by the Bone Idle'? But if we try and complain about it, we're told we're standing in the way of 'progress'… What use has life if it isn't for the people who have to live it?"

[*The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* (Series 1) BBC 1976]

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