

LABOUR, DIGNITY, AND THE DEMAND FOR AUTHENTICITY

The resonance of Catholic social thought in professional coaching ethics

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the philosophical and ethical resonances between a sustained reading of Catholic Social Teaching — drawing on *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Antiqua et Nova* (2025), and Leo XIV's *Builders At Forum Message* (2025) — and the professional framework developed by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). The paper argues that the same fundamental concerns which have animated Catholic reflection on labour and human dignity — the dangers of deception, self-deception, and the reductive instrumentalisation of the person — find striking structural parallels in the ICF's insistence on authenticity, transparency, and the formation of the whole person as preconditions for ethical coaching practice. Drawing on the philosophical traditions of phenomenology (Heidegger, Sartre), personalism (Maritain, Wojtyła), and the analysis of bad faith (Sartre) and self-concealment, the paper contends that the ICF Code of Ethics (2025) and its associated competencies are engaged, whether explicitly or not, in a project that Catholic Social Teaching has been pursuing for well over a century: the recovery of the person from the distortions of instrumentalism, and the insistence that authentic human relationship — not technique — is the ground of transformative practice.*

Keywords: International Coaching Federation, ICF Code of Ethics, authenticity, self-deception, bad faith, human dignity, Catholic Social Teaching, Rerum Novarum, labour, personalism, professional ethics

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1. INTRODUCTION – THE PERSON AT WORK

As a leader of people, and as an ICF Coach, I am conscious that there is a line of questioning that runs through all serious reflection on labour, from its deepest theological formulations to its most recent professional expressions, and it concerns a single, deceptively plain matter: what it means for a person to be genuinely *present* in their work. This is not a question about productivity, output, or even well-being in the attenuated sense that organisational psychology tends to favour. It is a question about truthfulness — about whether the person who labours, coaches, leads, or creates does so in a manner consistent with who they actually are, or whether, for reasons of fear, ambition, institutional pressure, or simple unreflective habit, they present to the world a version of themselves that is partial, performed, or falsified.

The document examined here — my three-way reading of *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Antiqua et Nova* (2025), and Leo XIV's *Builders AI Forum Message* (2025) (Uttley, 2026)— approaches this question from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching. This may appear a strangely partisan, or esoteric starting point to the more metropolitan of our international coaching community, but I would gently suggest it is worthy of consideration. My paper, and its component parts, has as its central concern the integrity of the person at work: the danger that labour, whether of the industrial worker in Leo XIII's late Victorian England or the technologist building artificial intelligence systems in the early twenty-first century, is evacuated of its human significance and reduced to a function, a commodity, a performance. The argument carried through all three pontifical texts is that this evacuation is not merely an economic injustice but an ontological one: it falsifies what the person is.

The present paper argues that this same concern — the insistence on the integrity and authenticity of the person in professional practice — structures the ethical framework of the International Coaching Federation (ICF), whose Code of Ethics (revised and adopted in 2025) and Core Competencies represent the most globally influential attempt to define what ethical coaching practice requires. The ICF's project is not explicitly theological, and

its vocabulary does not draw on natural law reasoning or *Imago Dei* anthropology. Yet at the level of structural concern, the parallels are striking and, this paper will argue, philosophically significant. Both traditions identify deception and self-deception — the falsification of the self in professional relationships — as the primary ethical risk to be guarded against. Both insist that technique and compliance are insufficient responses to this risk, and that something more fundamental — the formation of the whole person — is required. Both, in short, are engaged in the project of recovering the person from the distortions of instrumentalism.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the philosophical problem of authenticity and self-deception in the traditions of phenomenology and personalism that inform both bodies of reflection. Section 3 examines the specific resonances between the Catholic Social Teaching documents analysed by Uttley and the foundational commitments of the ICF. Section 4 analyses the ICF's response to the dangers of deception and self-deception through its Code of Ethics (ICF, 2025) and Core Competencies. Section 5 examines the challenge of coach formation — the ICF's attempt to produce professionals capable of authentic presence. Section 6 offers concluding reflections on the limits and possibilities of professional frameworks as vehicles for the recovery of authentic personhood.

2. AUTHENTICITY AND SELF-DECEPTION: THE PHILOSOPHICAL STAKES

2.1 The problem of bad faith

The term 'authenticity' has a specific philosophical genealogy that is worth recovering before it is deployed as a term of professional ethics. In the existentialist tradition — above all in the work of Heidegger and Sartre — authenticity names not a psychological quality (being 'genuine' in the colloquial sense) but an ontological achievement: the capacity to relate to oneself truthfully, to inhabit one's freedom and responsibility without evasion. The difficulty is that such evasion is not an aberration but, in Heidegger's analysis, the default condition of human existence. We are, Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*, characteristically absorbed in the 'they-self' (*das Man*) — in the anonymous expectations, roles, and interpretations that the social world provides, and which allow us to exist without the discomfort of genuine self-questioning (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Inauthenticity is not dishonesty in the ordinary sense; it is the refusal of the self-transparency that genuine existence requires.

Sartre gives this structure its most acute formulation in the concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). Bad faith is not simple lying to others but lying to oneself: the specific form of self-deception by which persons deny either their freedom (by presenting themselves as fully determined by role, circumstance, or nature) or their facticity (by pretending to a transcendence that ignores the real constraints of their situation) (Sartre, 1943/2003). The waiter who performs his role with such total identification that he has, as it were,

disappeared into it — who is 'the waiter' rather than a person who happens to do this for a living — exemplifies the first form of bad faith: the flight from freedom into the security of a function. This figure is not without resonance for professional life generally, and for coaching specifically, where the temptation to inhabit the role rather than bring oneself to it is a recognised occupational hazard.

The reason that bad faith is so persistent, Sartre argues, is that it is structurally motivated: the anxiety of genuine freedom is genuinely uncomfortable, and the social world provides abundant resources for its avoidance. Roles, credentials, procedures, scripts, and institutional identities all offer the practitioner a way of being a professional without the more demanding requirement of being a person. This is the philosophical depth behind the ICF's insistence that ethical practice cannot be reduced to rule-compliance: the rules can themselves become a vehicle of bad faith, a means by which the practitioner performs ethics without inhabiting it.

2.2 Personalism and the integrity of the person

Catholic personalism — in the traditions of Maritain, Mounier, and Wojtyła — approaches the same problem from a different metaphysical direction but arrives at structurally similar conclusions. For Maritain, the crucial distinction is between the person and the individual: the individual is the material, divisible, replaceable unit that social and economic systems tend to require; the person is the irreducible spiritual centre, oriented to truth, beauty, goodness, and ultimately to God, who cannot be reduced to a function without violence being done to what they are (Maritain, 1947). The reduction of the worker to a unit of productive labour power that Leo XIII diagnoses in *Rerum Novarum* is, in personalist terms, the treatment of the person as an individual: the evacuation of the spiritual depth that distinguishes persons from things.

Wojtyła develops this analysis in *The Acting Person* with particular attention to the integrity of the person in action. Authentic action, for Wojtyła, is action in which the person acts through their choices, not merely in accordance with external stimulus or social expectation; it is action in which the person's self-determination — their capacity to be the origin and not merely the vehicle of what they do — is genuinely exercised (Wojtyła, 1969/1979). The moral significance of this is not merely psychological but ontological: in acting authentically, the person becomes more fully who they are; in acting inauthentically, they diminish themselves. The parallel with Heidegger's analysis of authenticity is not coincidental: both thinkers are grappling with the same fundamental datum of human existence, namely that persons are not given to themselves but must, in some sense, achieve their own reality through the quality of their engagement with the world.

These philosophical traditions converge on a single claim that is directly relevant to the ethics of professional coaching: that the practitioner who brings a falsified version of

themselves to the coaching relationship — who performs presence, performs empathy, performs challenge — is not merely failing to comply with a professional standard but is committing a more fundamental violation of the person-to-person encounter that coaching, at its best, represents. The client's capacity to develop depends, in part, on the authenticity of the coach's presence; a coach who has not confronted their own self-deceptions cannot reliably help a client confront theirs.

3. CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE ICF: STRUCTURAL RESONANCES

3.1 The priority of the person over the system

The most fundamental structural parallel between Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the ICF framework is what might be called the anti-reductionist commitment: the insistence that no system, technology, or procedural framework, however sophisticated, can substitute for the formation of the person who operates within it. This commitment is stated in its most condensed form in Uttley's reading of *Rerum Novarum's* central argument: that the person, created in the image of a rational and creative God, cannot be reduced to a commodity. Pope Leo XIII's objection to industrial capitalism is not primarily economic but anthropological: the system treats as fungible that which is, by its nature, irreplaceable.

The ICF makes the same move in its foundational definition of coaching. Coaching is defined as 'partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential' (ICF, 2025). The operative concept is 'partnering': the coaching relationship is not a service transaction in which expertise is delivered to a passive recipient, nor is it a technique applied to a problem. It is an encounter between persons in which the coach's role is precisely to refuse to reduce the client to their presenting problem, their role, or their organisational function. The client is to be engaged as a whole person — rational, emotional, relational, and purposive — and the coach must bring a corresponding wholeness to the encounter.

Uttley's analysis of *Antiqua et Nova* (2025) identifies a directly analogous concern in the context of artificial intelligence. The Dicastery document warns explicitly against the 'functionalist perspective, where people are valued based on the work they can perform' (DDF, 2025: 34). The worry is that AI systems, by engaging only with the computable aspects of human life, will progressively narrow the range of human capacities that are recognised as significant, and that this narrowing will eventually restructure not only the economy but the imagination of what the person is. The ICF's insistence on the irreducibility of the coaching relationship — on the fact that no AI system can replicate the person-to-person encounter that genuine coaching requires — is a practical instantiation of exactly this concern.

3.2 The critique of technocratic instrumentalism

Both CST and the ICF framework are organised around what I call, following Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015), a critique of the 'technocratic paradigm': the assumption that the expansion of technical capability is self-evidently valuable, that technical problems have technical solutions, and that the person can be adequately understood in terms of what they can do and measure. *Rerum Novarum* resists this paradigm in the industrial context; *Antiqua et Nova* resists it in the digital context; and the ICF Code of Ethics (2025) resists it in the professional coaching context.

The ICF's resistance takes a specific form: the insistence that ethical practice cannot be reduced to compliance with rules, and that the practitioner must develop what the Code calls a 'coaching mindset' — a disposition of curiosity, openness, and self-awareness that goes beyond the correct application of technique. The Code's Professionalism value requires coaches to be 'true and accurate in their statements' and to demonstrate 'honesty, courage, consistency of action, ethical practice, and the highest standards' (ICF, 2025). The Humanity value requires coaches to create 'authentic relationships that support honesty, transparency, and clarity' and to seek and develop 'self-awareness' continuously (ICF, 2025). These are not compliance requirements: they are formative demands addressed to the whole person.

This formative dimension maps precisely onto what I identify as the shared priority of moral formation over legislative mechanism in the CST tradition. Pope Leo XIII's insistence that no purely legislative or economic solution to the social question will suffice without the formation of conscience through religious and moral education finds its secular professional analogue in the ICF's requirement that ethical development be continuous, reflective, and grounded in genuine self-awareness rather than procedural knowledge. The point, in both frameworks, is that rules are necessary but insufficient: what is required is the formation of a practitioner capable of ethical reasoning in situations that no rule has anticipated.

3.3 Labour, creativity, and the impress of the person

There is a further and more specific resonance between an analysis of the labour tradition through the lens of CST and the ICF's understanding of coaching practice. Leo XIII's claim, as I read it, is that in working, the person puts 'the impress of his personality' on the material world — that labour is one of the primary modes through which the dignity of the person as *Imago Dei* is expressed. This claim does not apply only to manual labour: it applies wherever a person exercises genuine creative agency in transforming the world, including in the creative relational work that coaching represents.

The ICF definition of coaching as a 'thought-provoking and creative process' is not accidental. It signals that coaching, at its best, is not a routine service but a creative act: an encounter in which the coach brings genuine attention, perception, and responsiveness to a situation that is never quite like any other. Leo XIV's extension of the

Leonine argument to the technologist — the claim that the builder of AI expresses the *imago Dei* in their creative choices and therefore carries ethical and spiritual weight — applies with equal force to the coach. Every coaching conversation is a creative act that embodies a vision of what the person is and what they are capable of becoming. If that vision is impoverished, performed, or falsified, something more than a professional standard has been violated.

4. THE ICF'S RESPONSE TO DECEPTION AND SELF-DECEPTION

4.1 The structure of the ICF Code of Ethics (2025)

The ICF Code of Ethics (2025), adopted by the ICF Global Board in October 2024 and entering into effect on 1 April 2025, is organised around four core values — Professionalism, Collaboration, Humanity, and Equity — and twenty-eight ethical standards grouped across five sections: Agreements for Client and Sponsor Engagement; Confidentiality and Legal Compliance; Professional Conduct and Conflicts of Interest; Commitment to Delivering Consistent Value; and Professional Integrity and Accountability. The architecture of the Code is significant: it does not begin with rules but with values, and the values are explicitly aspirational and formative in character. The standards are presented as expressions of the values, not as the values themselves. This is the ICF's version of the CST tradition's insistence that moral formation precedes and underlies legal compliance.

The 2025 revision introduced several significant changes that are directly relevant to the concerns of this paper. It expanded the applicability of the Code beyond credentialed coaches to all within the ICF ecosystem; it added explicit provisions governing the use of artificial intelligence (Standard 2.5); and it introduced, for the first time, the language of 'role transparency' (Standard 3.7), requiring coaches who serve in multiple professional capacities to disclose when they are acting in a capacity other than that of ICF professional. This last requirement is directly responsive to the risk of identity falsification that the philosophical tradition identifies as the primary form of professional bad faith: the practitioner who presents themselves as a coach whilst actually performing the role of assessor, therapist, or consultant is not merely creating a conflict of interest but engaging in a form of deception that undermines the entire relational foundation of the coaching encounter.

4.2 Deception: the external form

The ICF Code identifies and addresses deception in its external form — the falsification of one's qualifications, claims, or professional identity to clients, sponsors, or the public — through a cluster of standards in Section 5 (Professional Integrity and Accountability). Standard 5.1 requires coaches to 'accurately identify my coaching qualifications and work within the boundaries of my level of coaching competency, expertise, experience,

training, certifications, and my ICF credential'. Standard 5.2 requires verbal and written statements to be 'true and accurate' about what is offered, and Standard 2.6 in the 2024 Ethical Conduct and Compliance Report identified misrepresentation as a recurrent basis for formal complaints against ICF professionals (ICF, 2025b).

What is philosophically significant about these standards is not their content — any professional code will prohibit misrepresentation — but their location within a larger ethical architecture. Deception is treated not as a discrete violation but as the most visible expression of a deeper failure of professional integrity. The coach who overstates their qualifications or misrepresents the potential value of coaching is doing something more than breaking a rule: they are placing their own interests, anxieties, or ambitions above the wellbeing of the client, which is to say that they are inverting the fundamental orientation that the coaching relationship requires. This inversion is precisely what CST identifies as the characteristic failure of labour relations corrupted by capital: the subordination of the person to the economic interest of another.

4.3 Self-Deception: the internal form

More philosophically substantial is the ICF's implicit engagement with self-deception — the form of bad faith that Sartre identifies as more fundamental and more dangerous than the external lie. The Code's Humanity value requires coaches to seek 'continuously' the development of self-awareness, to acknowledge and own their mistakes, and to recognise that 'as humans, I am not meant to be perfect, and with a coaching mindset, expressing imperfections is an opportunity for me to spread a culture of openness and self-acceptance' (ICF, 2025). Section 4.2 of the Ethical Standards requires coaches to 'recognise my personal limitations or circumstances that may impair my coaching performance or professional commitments', and to seek support when this is necessary.

These requirements are not merely precautionary: they are formative demands that presuppose a particular relationship to oneself. The coach who has not confronted their own patterns of avoidance, projection, or self-idealisation will inevitably import these patterns into the coaching relationship, not through deliberate deception but through the unreflective enactment of an inauthentic self. This is the professional analogue of Heidegger's analysis of the 'they-self': the practitioner absorbed in the anonymous expectations of the professional role, delivering technically competent coaching whilst remaining absent from it as a person.

The ICF's commitment to continuous ethics education — which the 2025 Code mandates for all credentialed professionals — reflects an understanding that the risk of self-deception cannot be addressed by a one-time intervention but requires sustained reflective practice over the course of a professional lifetime. This structural feature of the ICF approach maps precisely onto what I identify as the eschatological horizon of CST: the conviction that the moral formation of the person is not a problem that is ever definitively

solved but a project that is permanently underway, always already incomplete. Leo XIII's insistence on ongoing moral and religious formation; *Antiqua et Nova's* vision of 'wisdom of the heart' as the integrating faculty that no algorithm can supply; and the ICF's requirement of continuous ethical development are all expressions of the same fundamental insight: that the person who is adequate to the demands of authentic professional relationship is not discovered but cultivated, not certified but formed.

4.4 Power, structural concentration, and the coaching relationship

In my paper, I identify structural concentration of power as one of the five major resonances between *Rerum Novarum* and the contemporary CST documents. Leo XIII's concern about the concentration of capital in the hands of comparatively few is directly echoed in *Antiqua et Nova's* concern about the concentration of AI development in a handful of powerful companies. The ICF's Code addresses an analogous structural concern at the level of the dyadic coaching relationship: the power differential between coach and client.

Standard 4.1 requires coaches to be 'aware of and, in partnership with my client, actively manage any power or status differential between us that may be caused by cultural, relational, psychological, or contextual issues' (ICF, 2025). Standard 3.4 requires the maintenance of 'clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern professional interactions'. And Standard 3.5 requires awareness of biases and their active management to prevent discrimination. These requirements address the risk that the coach's structural authority — their positional power as a credentialed expert, the client's vulnerability in self-disclosure, and the asymmetry of knowledge — will be used, consciously or otherwise, to serve the coach's interests rather than the client's.

The philosophical significance of this risk is well articulated in Simone Weil's analysis of social power and its tendency to produce 'affliction' (*malheur*) — the condition of the person whose capacity for self-determination has been systematically undermined by the structural position they occupy (Weil, 1952). A coaching relationship in which the client's genuine agency is progressively colonised by the coach's interpretive framework, however benevolently motivated, is not a coaching relationship; it is a form of subtle domination. The ICF's insistence on the client's ultimate authority over their own agenda, goals, and development is not merely a methodological preference but an ethical principle grounded in the recognition of the person's irreducible right to self-determination — a right that *Rerum Novarum*, in its own register, was already insisting upon in 1891.

5. COACH FORMATION AND THE PROBLEM OF AUTHENTIC PRESENCE

5.1 The insufficiency of technique

One of the most important implications of the philosophical analysis developed in this paper is that the primary challenge in producing ethical coaches is not the transmission of

knowledge or even the development of skill, but the formation of a particular quality of self-relation in the practitioner. A coach may know the ICF Code of Ethics in its entirety and possess a sophisticated repertoire of coaching tools and yet be fundamentally absent from the coaching encounter — performing coaching rather than practising it. The distinction corresponds to what Wojtyła calls the difference between action and mere behaviour: action is the expression of the person's self-determination; behaviour is the enactment of an external stimulus or script (Wojtyła, 1969/1979).

The ICF's credentialing process implicitly recognises this distinction in its insistence that assessed coaching must demonstrate not merely technical competence but genuine relational presence. The Core Competency 'Maintains Presence' — situated within the domain of Co-Creating the Relationship — requires coaches to 'be fully conscious and present with the client' and to 'demonstrate curiosity about the client, their perspective, and situation' (ICF, 2025c). The assessor's task is not to evaluate whether the coach has followed the correct procedure but whether genuine engagement with this particular client is visible in the session. This is a significantly more demanding form of professional accountability than rule-compliance, and it is one that cannot be satisfied by the coach who has not brought themselves, as a whole person, to the work.

5.2 Supervision and the formation of self-awareness

The ICF's provision for coach supervision — a structured reflective process in which experienced practitioners support the ongoing professional and ethical development of coaches through dialogue about their practice — represents the most explicit acknowledgement within the framework that the formation of authentic presence is a relational achievement, not a solitary one. The Code defines coach supervision as 'a dynamic and reflective process of collaboration, guidance, and support through which coaches develop their personal, professional, and ethical capacity and maturity' (ICF, 2025). The language of 'maturity' is significant: it signals that what is being developed is not merely technical proficiency but a stage of personal development that is, by its nature, gradual, non-linear, and never complete.

This model of professional formation through sustained reflective relationship has a direct antecedent in the CST tradition's insistence on the centrality of moral and religious formation. Leo XIII's argument that 'no practical solution will be found apart from the intervention of religion and the Church' — that justice requires not merely legislation but the formation of conscience — is recast in secular professional terms in the ICF's insistence that ethical competence requires not merely training but ongoing reflective supervision. Both frameworks recognise that the kind of self-awareness required for authentic practice is not a natural endowment but a cultivated achievement, and that its cultivation requires the support of a community of practice that takes the demands of authentic personhood seriously.

5.3 The risk of institutional bad faith

The philosophical tradition also alerts us to a risk that neither the CST documents nor the ICF Code addresses with full explicitness: the possibility that the professional institution itself, rather than the individual practitioner, may become the vehicle of bad faith. If the ICF's Code of Ethics becomes primarily a credentialing mechanism — a set of standards that coaches learn to perform in order to pass assessments, rather than to internalise as the expression of genuine conviction — then the institution will have replicated, at the level of the professional framework, exactly the reductive instrumentalism that both CST and the Code are designed to resist.

This is not a criticism of the ICF but a structural observation about the limits of any codified professional framework. I identify the same structural risk in the CST tradition's engagement with technology: the concern that guidelines and regulatory frameworks for AI development may produce compliance without conviction, and that the 'wisdom of the heart' which *Antiqua et Nova* identifies as the integrating faculty required for genuine ethical discernment cannot be produced by institutional mechanisms. Both the ICF and CST are aware of this limit; both insist on formation, not merely compliance; and both acknowledge that the ultimate resource for authentic professional practice is the practitioner's own character, formed by genuine engagement with the demands of the work and the persons it serves.

6. CONCLUSION: THE LONG WORK OF FORMATION

I have argued that the Catholic Social Teaching tradition examined in my three-way reading (Uttley, 2026) and the International Coaching Federation's professional ethical framework are engaged in the same fundamental project: the recovery of the person from the distortions of instrumentalism, and the insistence that authentic human relationship — not technique, not compliance, and not credential — is the ground of transformative practice. This convergence is not accidental. Both traditions are responding to the same structural temptation that characterises modern professional life: the temptation to substitute the performance of a role for the inhabited presence of a person.

The specific resonances traced in this paper — between the CST critique of technocratic instrumentalism and the ICF's commitment to the irreducibility of the person in coaching; between Leo XIII's insistence on moral formation over legislative mechanism and the ICF's requirement of continuous ethical development; between the personalist tradition's analysis of authentic action and the ICF's demand for genuine relational presence; between the CST tradition's attention to structural power and the ICF's requirement that power differentials in the coaching relationship be actively managed — suggest that these two frameworks are, in important respects, drawing on the same deep wells of philosophical and ethical reasoning, even when their explicit vocabularies diverge.

The philosophical traditions of phenomenology and personalism examined in Section 2 provide the conceptual bridge. The analysis of bad faith (Sartre), the structure of authentic existence (Heidegger), and the integrity of the person in action (Wojtyła) all illuminate the same fundamental datum: that the practitioner who has not confronted their own self-deceptions cannot reliably serve the authentic development of another. This is a claim that no professional code, however carefully drafted, can enforce by external means. It is a claim about character, formation, and the long, non-linear work of becoming a person adequate to the demands of genuine encounter.

Leo XIV's closing vision in the Builders AI Forum Message — of an intelligence, whether artificial or human, that 'reflects the Creator's design: intelligent, relational and guided by love' — names this adequacy in its fullest theological register. The ICF's vision is necessarily more modest in its metaphysical commitments, but its practical demand is recognisably the same: that the coach be present to the client as a whole person, that the coaching relationship be grounded in authentic encounter rather than performed service, and that the formation of this authenticity be treated as the primary and permanent task of professional development. The Church thought in centuries; the ICF has been building this framework for decades. Both have understood, with increasing clarity, that the question is ultimately the same: what does it mean for a person to be truthfully present in their work?

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