Work on Oneself: Rethinking Authenticity

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This article addresses the concept of authenticity, a characteristic of late modern Western culture. This characteristic is viewed by some as an ideal and by others as a root of the problems inherent within Western culture. After discussing various viewpoints, the author supports the idea that authenticity should not be totally accepted or rejected and sets forth a proposal based on the so-called "negative ethics" or "skeptical ethics".

Keywords: authenticity, Western culture, sincerity, negative ethics, sceptical ethics.

Introduction

Authenticity is arguably one of the most characteristic concepts of Western late modern culture. It is sometimes affirmed as an ideal (particularly, but not only, in self-help books), but at the same time, the pursuit for authenticity is sometimes looked at as representing all that is going wrong in Western culture. Those who position themselves somewhere in-between the embrace and the rejection of authenticity tend to distinguish between good authenticity and bad authenticity, as

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it were. In this paper, I will take up the idea that we ought neither to embrace nor altogether reject authenticity, and I will draw from negative ethics/sceptical ethics in my proposal.

The Shortcomings of Authenticity

Regarding the shortcomings of authenticity, it is often claimed that the imperative to be oneself is empty if it lacks any orientation regarding the kind of self that is worth striving for (Kreutzer 2016, 12). Pleading for authenticity without offering any criteria for the good can be destructive if any personal choice is being heralded merely for the sake of being a personal choice. Cultural critics have made this point many times (Lasch 1979; Bloom 1988). The core problem of a late modern or postmodern cult of authenticity is the idea that there is a true self hidden somewhere deep within ourselves, underneath the many things that shape our lives but which are not the "Real Me." In this sense, "[t]he authentic self is the individual who can stand alone, shedding all status relations and social entanglements" (Guignon 2004, 73). This idea is epistemologically fraud, simply because there is no way we could ever access our Real Me, the kernel of our personality. Ernst Tugendhat has made this point very clear in his lectures on self-determination. He is asking his audience to look into their selves, and he then comments: "If I try to look into my real self, I do not see anything" (Tugendhat 1979, 13ff.), by which he presumably means that he can see a manifoldness of relations within himself, but not the naked real self. There is no way to determine what the Real Me is supposed to be, since I do not ever get to see my Real Me. My ideas about this Real Me are subject to potential self-deception and most certainly bear the imprint of my social environment (Menke 2011, 224, 229).

Finding a Place for Authenticity

This diagnosis has motivated the attempt to unearth the actual substance of the concept of "authenticity" that is lost in relativistic and individualistic guises, and it is sometimes suggested that *sincerity* is

some kind of "authentic" core of the concept of authenticity. In their article in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Varga and others have given a neat summary of the contrast between authenticity and sincerity:

> The older concept of sincerity, referring to being truthful in order to be honest in one's dealings with others, comes to be replaced by a relatively new concept of authenticity, understood as being true to oneself for one's own benefit. Earlier, the moral advice to be authentic recommended that one should be true to oneself *in order thereby* to be true to others. Thus, being true to oneself is seen as a *means* to the end of successful social relations. In contrast, in our contemporary thinking, authenticity as a virtue term is seen as referring to a way of acting that is choiceworthy in itself. (Varga and Guignon 2016)

In a similar vein, Charles Taylor famously proposes to distinguish between two kinds of authenticity: one good and one bad; to say it simply, he opposes the actual ideal of authenticity to its decadent version. The authentic kind of authenticity is framed within a horizon which has a transcendent character (Taylor 2003). In the eighteenth century, authenticity meant that human beings are receptive to the guidance of their inner intuition, and that they are true to themselves by realising the possibilities that really belong to an individual (Taylor 2003). So, Taylor's idea is to unearth potentials in the tradition that he expects to act as remedies against the individualistic decay of authenticity (Herdt 2014, 194). This decay of authenticity consists in the idea that the very act of choosing a particular self has an inherent value, regardless of the particular nature of that decision (Taylor 2003). Taylor objects that I cannot simply decide that to move my toes in warm dirt is itself a meaningful act (Taylor 2003). In contrast to such "soft relativism," Taylor makes it clear that only things which transcend the self are candidates for a meaningful choice (Taylor 1989, 507; cf. Herdt 2014). Things are only important within a horizon that gives meaning (Taylor 2011). And this, to find things of meaning, is only possible if

we restore our inner connection to the sacred. So, one *can* distinguish between more meaningful and less meaningful modes of self-choice; if this were not the case, then the very idea of self-choice would be empty (Taylor 2012; cf. Jaeggi 2014, 49).

The problem I see with Taylor's account is that we cannot go back to a time when the idea of an inner Godly voice was undisputed. Taylor is weak where he appears to suggest that we somehow restore the good old times. We cannot expect culture on the whole to return to a pre-secular age and to its noble ideas about authenticity (Legenhausen n.d., 21). It is well said that we have to establish or restore our "connection to the sacred," as Taylor claims in his *The Malaise of Modernity*, but Taylor does not explain what he means by "the sacred" here.[1] In *A Secular Age*, Taylor does distinguish between a secular sacred and a clerical, dogmatic sacred (Taylor 2007). However, in either sense of the term, Taylor's proposal that we have to establish or restore our connection to the sacred runs into difficulties. If he is referring to a clerical, dogmatic sacred, then this claim is reactionary. On the other hand, Taylor cannot really refer to the secular sacred, since the secular sacred is fluid and not something that we can establish a connection to. I do think Taylor is right in claiming that there is something of worth in the idea of authenticity, but I think that his opposition between meaningful choice and empty choice is too simple. My proposal will be to move beyond the dimension of choice and to introduce the notion of "work on oneself."

Part of the reason why I am sceptical about Taylor's contrast between meaningful choice and empty choice is that I think choosing a particular self is not the most crucial aspect. Instead, what matters is the work one does in the light of a vision of the kind of human being one would want to be. If we look at influential Christian narratives of choice

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1. On Taylor and the sacred, see Gordon (2008).

and conversion, like Augustine's conversion, Martin Luther's so called reformatory discovery, or Kierkegaard's alleged option between different kinds of existence in more detail, I think we find that the idea of choice, turnaround and conversion is a way of giving expression to a personal change that is really the result of an arduous process and not something that just happens in the blink of an eye, even if narrative literature likes to condense personal developments in the narrative construction of conversion events (Schmidt 2011, 47ff.). Therefore, in what follows I will not oppose good authenticity to bad authenticity *pace* Taylor; instead, I will distinguish between *strong authenticity* and *weak authenticity*. Strong authenticity is the idea that one somehow "pulls oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness," as Nietzsche once put it with allusion to a famous fictional character from German literature (Nietzsche 2002, 21 [no. 21]). I doubt that this is possible, and recent empirical research on virtue ethics would second my doubts. In contrast, *weak authenticity* assumes that we are obliged to overcome inauthenticity and lack of integrity as much as we can. But we never get done with this pursuit of overcoming inauthenticity, we are always trying and failing and trying; at best, we sense a direction in the series of attempts that we undertake. Also, we heavily rely on the support of others, who have to remind us of the good if we lose sight of it (Schmidt 2015). In view of this idea of weak authenticity, I will go through main passages of the history or prehistory of authenticity and then make a couple of remarks as to how authenticity can be meaningful today.

Part of the reason why I would stand up for authenticity is that authenticity could be linked, albeit loosely, to what one could call creative createdness. By creative createdness, I mean the tradition according to which human beings are images of God in so far as they are bestowed with creative freedom. Origen calls the human being that "nature," which is created by its own freedom (cf. Origen 2002, 175ff.

[*RomCom* VIII,11]; Kobusch 2008).[1] Gregor von Nyssa holds that "[w]e are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice" (Gregory 1978, 55f.; Kobusch 2008, 240). Nicolaus von Cusa argues that just like God is an almighty creator, human beings are creative creatures.

> For just as God is the Creator of real beings and of natural forms, so man is the creator of conceptual beings and of artificial forms that are only likenesses of his intellect, even as God's creatures are likenesses of the Divine Intellect. (Nicholas of Cusa 2001, 794 [*de beryllo* 7])

This tradition is prominently adopted by renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola, who argues that the dignity of the human being lies in his *not being defined*, in being a creation without a peculiar natural equipment, as it were. Famously, Pico imagines God saying to Adam:

> Adam, we give you no fixed place to live, no form that is peculiar to you, nor any function that is yours alone. According to your desires and judgement, you will have and possess whatever place to live, whatever form, and whatever functions you yourself choose. All other things have a limited and fixed nature prescribed and bounded by Our laws. You, with no limit or no bound, may choose for yourself the limits and bounds of your nature. We have placed you at the world's center so that you may survey everything else in the world. We have made you neither of heavenly nor of earthly stuff, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with free choice and dignity, you may fashion yourself into whatever form you choose. To you is granted the power of degrading yourself into the lower forms of life, the beasts, and to you is granted the power, contained in your intellect and judgement, to be reborn into the higher forms, the divine. (Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni et al. 2012, 117)

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1. Origin is primarily thinking of the freedom to choose between good and evil, virtue and lust.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who ties with Pico, though in a secular reign, holds that man is the animal that is "unfixed animal" (Nietzsche 2002, 56 [§ 62]). Human beings have the task of giving "style" to themselves.

> One Thing is Needful. To "give style" to one's character that is a grand and a rare art! He who surveys all that his nature presents in its strength and in its weakness, and then fashions it into an ingenious plan, until everything appears artistic and rational, and even the weaknesses enchant the eye, exercises that admirable art. Here there has been a great amount of second nature added, there a portion of first nature has been taken away: in both cases with long exercise and daily labour at the task. (Nietzsche 2001, 163f. [No. 290])

It is worth taking note of the wording. To give style to oneself is not some kind of total spontaneity, as if we could simply jump into the kind of self that we desire. Rather, it is hard *work*. We do not fly into flying, says Nietzsche in a different text; we first have to learn standing and climbing and dancing (Nietzsche 2006 [III *Of the Spirit of Gravity* § 2]). This work is negative work as it contains *taking away*. In this respect, to become a self means to carve out one's self in patient work, as Nietzsche says in his fragments (cf. Nietzsche 1988 [NF-1880,7 (213)]). Unlike in expressivist authenticity, Nietzsche's authenticity is about *carving out* the self; that is, working with something that is already there, rather than merely presenting or inventing the self. Here, we can also see the link to Nietzsche's explicit remarks on sincerity, which consists in fighting off the lies that one lives in (Schmidt 2014, 42ff.). So becoming an authentic self is not about *finding* one's hidden true style and then merely giving expression to it, and neither is it about making something up from scratch. Rather, becoming an authentic self it is about starting off from the self that one already is and then carving out the self, which is to some extent a negative labour. The picture we get is quite distinct from that of expressive authenticity, which assumes that we only have to shrug of the external world.

We can see that being authentic starts off by surmounting inauthenticity, since inauthenticity is part of our existence. In similar vein, Jean-Paul Sartre concludes his famous novel *Nausea* by letting his protagonist, who is a writer, say his only hope had been to be able to write a story which would be beautiful and hard and that would make people feel ashamed about their own inauthentic existence. Lionel Trilling comments: "The authentic work of art instructs us in our inauthenticity and adjures us to overcome it" (Trilling 1972, 93).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think the appeal to be authentic is ostensibly asking too much. Urging people to work against inauthenticity and thus work towards authentic being is still asking a lot, but it is not asking too much (cf. Legenhausen n.d., 20). The distinction thereby drawn calls a kind of ethics into play that has been called negative ethics.[1] Negative ethics rests on the simple assumption that rather than trying to be good, which is potentially asking too much, we should avoid being bad/evil: "The good—this is certain—is the bad which one does not do" (Busch 1974, 121 "Das Gute – dieser Satz steht fest – ist stets das Böse, was man lässt"). This idea of negative ethics might need further exploration, but I will not go into negative ethics anymore and will dwell on the idea of "work on oneself" a little more.

Wittgenstein famously claimed that philosophy is all about working on oneself: "Working in philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things (And what one expects of them)" (Wittgenstein 1980, 24e [MS 112 46: 14.10.1931]). And this passage from Wittgenstein's later work ties with his earlier Tractatus, where it says:

> Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.
> A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.
> The result of philosophy is not a number of "philosophical

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1. On negative ethics, see Ottmann (2005; 2014) and Schweppenhäuser (1993).

propositions", but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred. (Wittgenstein 1990, 4.112)

The misunderstanding of the strive for authenticity is the idea that everything is already there, as if there was some seed within me that I merely have to let grow without external inhibitions, and as if whatever were then to evolve was justified for the sake of being an expression of my internal being. Work on oneself, in contrast, does assume that there is something that is already there in each individual, and to be an authentic person means to take this seriously, but the act of taking seriously what is there in an individual is – hard work. This work is first of all work on how one sees things; it and means clarifying one's perceptions and failures to perceive. Introducing this idea changes the perspective of authenticity: Authenticity being understood as a process of working on oneself is not about obsessive self-introspection, but about clarifying one's vista of the external world.

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