

AUTHENTICITY AND ENHANCEMENT: GOING BEYOND THE SELF-CREATION/SELF-DISCOVERY DICHOTOMY

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Abstract. The purpose of my paper is to challenge the binary classification of authenticity, which is currently employed in the bioethical debate on enhancement technologies. According to the standard dichotomy, there is a stark opposition between the self-discovery model, which depicts the self as a substantial and original inwardness, and the self-creation model, which assumes that the self is an open project, that has to be constituted by one's free actions. My claim is that the so-called self-creation model actually conflates two distinct versions of authenticity: one that is decisionist and one that is experimentalist. Hence, my proposal is to distinguish between three different models of authenticity: (i) self-discovery, which is an expressivist model of authenticity; (ii) existential commitment, which is a decisionist model; and (iii) reinvention of the self, which is an experimentalist model. Such a three-fold distinction will cast a more nuanced and clear light upon the enhancement debate.

Keywords: human enhancement, psychopharmaceuticals, authenticity, self-discovery, existential commitment, reinvention of the self.

Over the last three decades, the concept of authenticity has (re)gained a great deal of attention among philosophers, both in the analytic and the Continental tradition. Ever since Charles Taylor's two books, *Sources of the Self*¹ and his more compressed and accessible *Ethics of Authenticity*,² the normative category of authenticity had become a highly plausible candidate for leading a good life. And, in the past years, authenticity was treated not just as a morally neutral and elusive concept of existentialist phenomenology, but also as a useful conceptual tool for

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¹Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

²Charles, Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts & London, 1991.

getting a proper and complex insight into the practical realm of ethics. Under such circumstances, maybe it is not a surprise that the debates surrounding personal authenticity have proliferated even in one of the most empirically-laden domains of philosophy – applied ethics (more specifically, bioethics). In this respect, one notable example of such a debate is whether psychopharmaceuticals and other enhancement technologies might threaten the authenticity of the agents using them.

Prior to this dispute, in the early '90, some scholars even argued that authenticity is not only a rather helpful concept, but a “foundational principle of medical ethics”.³ Back then, such a statement appeared to be a bold claim for the majority of bioethicists, who considered the concept of autonomy as a sufficient tool for a complete explanation of the individual self-ownership. At that time, authenticity seemed a “useless operationalization of autonomy”.⁴ However, times have changed, and so has the academic views on authenticity. Today most of the philosophers working in the field of bioethics regard authenticity as an unavoidable issue in many contemporary debates.

But, as unavoidable as it looks, authenticity is far from being a clear and well-defined notion, in spite of the vast number of truisms and methodological assumptions that can be found in every paper on the subject. In the present paper, I want to challenge one of these widely adopted assumptions, namely that there is a dichotomy between a self-discovery model and a self-creation model of authenticity. I will accomplish this task, by proposing a three-fold taxonomy of authenticity, which can successfully replace the existing dichotomy between the two above mentioned models. If my taxonomy is more accurate than the current binary distinction, than this will shed a new light on the neuroenhancement debate, launching new provocations to those interested in the subject.

First, I will briefly outline the basic elements regarding the use of authenticity in the enhancement debate, and afterwards I will layout my three-model classification.

In the enhancement debate, the concept of authenticity was most famously put forward by Carl Elliot, who expressed the worry that enhancement technologies might endanger our personal authenticity.⁵ Elliot’s objection to enhancing psychopharmaceuticals was that what seems to be an improvement could be assessed positively only from an external or third-person standpoint. However, if such a so-called improvement is filtered through the first-person lenses, then it appears to be a kind of alienation or self-estrangement. And, since authenticity is to be assessed first and foremost from the personal point of view, neuroenhancement represents only an alteration of one’s personality, and not a real and deep

³ Jos V. M Welie, “Authenticity as a foundational principle of medical ethics” in *Theoretical Medicine*, September 1994, Volume 15, Issue 3, 1994, p. 211–225.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁵ See: Carl Elliot, “The tyranny of happiness: Ethics and cosmetic psychopharmacology” in E. Parens (ed.), *Enhancing Human Traits. Ethical and Social Implications*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 1998, and Carl Elliot, “Enhancement Technologies and the Modern Self”, *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 36(4), 2011, p. 364–374.

improvement. To put it shortly, the enhancing drugs seem to make one better only from an outside view, but seen from the inside they are actually distorting one's true self.

Elliot's challenge prompted many reactions, from different angles and tackling various aspects of authenticity. However, most of the papers have a common denominator, and this common denominator is the distinction between two rival models of authenticity, which Elliot did not take into account in his original paper. On the one hand, there is the self-discovery model, an essentialist one, which describes the ideal of being true to one's self in terms of being true to one's inner voice or, in other words, to be in contact with one's given nature, which is expressed through one's deepest feelings, desires and cravings. According to the self-creation mode, the self is static, and the authentic individual is bound to remain faithful to his original nature. On the other hand, there is the self-creation model, an existentialist one, which describes the ideal of being true to one's self – without necessary presupposing a fixed essence of the self – in terms of being true to one's self-imposed aspirations and self-chosen life goals. According to the self-creation model, the self is an open project, which could be fashioned in a totally unconstrained manner.

Resorting on this distinction, the defenders of enhancement technologies had two strategies in refuting Elliot's objection. Some, like David DeGrazia,⁶ have said that even though Elliot's objection might be right with respect to the self-discovery model of authenticity, it misses its target when confronted to the other model, as psychopharmaceuticals can lead to the enhancement of self-creation. Others, like Neil Levy,⁷ insisted that the very self-discovery model is still compatible with the new enhancement technologies. One thing is clear: the dichotomy between self-discovery and self-creation is a common place of the debates on authenticity and neuroenhancement. Even Carl Elliot took into account this distinction, when he later reprised the critique of enhancement technologies.⁸

The prevalent character of this dichotomy is not a surprise. In fact, the rapid diffusion of the distinction between self-discovery and self-creation is just an echo of its extensive spreading among scholars working outside the field of bioethics. Many ethicists, historians of ideas, and even psychologists employ the same dichotomy.⁹ But, despite its large circulation, I think this binary classification is not an accurate one. The problem with it rests on the second model, which – under the

⁶David DeGrazia, "Prozac, Enhancement, and Self-Creation" in *The Hastings Center Report* 30, no. 2, 2000, p. 34–40

⁷Neil Levy, "Enhancing Authenticity", *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 28 (3), 2011, p. 308–318.

⁸Carl Elliot, *A Philosophical Disease: Bioethics, Culture and Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1999, p. 33.

⁹See, for example, the following authors: Charles Guignon, "Authenticity", *Philosophy Compass*, 3 (2), 2008, p. 277–290; Somogy Varga, *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal*, Routledge, New York, 2011, p. 61–77; , Lauren Bialystock, "Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy", *Dialogue*, 53 (2), 2014, p. 271–298; Miriam Donaghy. "Authenticity: A Goal to Therapy?", *Practical Philosophy*, 5 (2), 2002, p. 40–45.

comprehensive umbrella of “self-creation” – conflates two distinct versions of authenticity: a decisionist model and an experimentalist one. These two models cannot be reduced to one another; therefore an accurate taxonomy of authenticity must take into account yet another distinction, thus resulting in a three-fold classification. I will further on try to sketch my own taxonomy, which distinguishes between three types of authenticity: **(i)** expressivist; **(ii)** decisionist; **(iii)** experimentalist.

(i) The first model of authenticity, which I have labelled as “expressivist”, is identical with the self-creation model, from the standard classification.

According to the expressivist model, the authentic individual is a person who acknowledges her inner voice, and acts according to her inner calling, thus realizing her own unique way of being human. In short, staying true to oneself means staying true to an original self. This original self, which is given in advance, is best understood as an idiosyncratic collection of natural desires, inclinations and passions, which must be expressed in the actual conduct of a person. From this point of view, inauthenticity resides in ignoring or distorting your original self, i.e. your deepest feelings and dispositions. The expressivist model of authenticity has its intellectual roots in Romanticism, especially in the works of authors like Herder or Rousseau. There are some basic principles of this version of authenticity, which are common not just for the two Romantic authors, but also for a long line of modern philosophers, poets and novelists.

The first principle of the expressivist model is that the self has a fixed essence, a stable and coherent identity, which lies deep within, beneath all our social appearances and conscientious presentations. But, as deep as it may be, such a self is not a completely hidden and inaccessible entity, which resists our struggle to detect and publicly disclose it. The self is transparent to itself; therefore the path to authenticity passes through to a preliminary act of introspection. From this standpoint, the self of the expressivist model has three properties: substantiality, inwardness and transparency. As such, the quest for authenticity is a struggle for self-transparency that entails the opposition between what is essential or necessary and what is extraneous or contingent, and between what is inward and what is outward.

The second assumption of authenticity is that the opposition between inwardness and outwardness is, at the same time, an opposition between nature and culture. The true self is a natural entity, a self that is detectable in our most basic feelings, inclinations and dispositions, and which tend to be altered by our deceitful quest for social status. In this respect, Rousseau’s work is the most relevant example of the Romantic extolling for a simple and benign way of life, far away from the corruption of modern society. If – as the French philosopher said – our conscience speaks in the language of nature,¹⁰ than, conversely, inauthenticity is

¹⁰Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, tr. A. Bloom, Basic Books, New York, 1979, p. 291.

synonym with artificiality, disingenuousness and social conformism. To counter this social tendency towards inauthenticity, we have to actualize our primordial vocation of free, genuine and straightforward beings. What we search for is a personal truth that was given to us by our very nature, so the only struggle is to uncover this pre-existing truth, not to make one from scratch. With this, I come to the next assumption of self-discovery.

The third and the most important assumption I wish to emphasize here is that this inward, pre-existing truth needs not only to be detected, but also to be externally manifested. Self-knowledge is not sufficient if it is not followed by self-manifestation. Once it is found, the inner voice has to be openly exercised. From this point of view, authenticity is not a mere private condition, an invisible obsession with inwardness, but a publicly recognisable feature, a visible display of one's inner nature. The search for the true self is fulfilled only as an expression of that self. And that is why I have labelled the self-discovery model as an expressivist one.

(ii) The second model of authenticity, which I have labelled as “decisionist”, describes the authentic individual as a person of passionate conviction, a human being that is holding firmly to her existential commitments. This model rests on the assumption that the self is not a hidden substance and does not have a fixed essence; therefore staying true to oneself does not allude to express one's inner nature. And, if the self is not given in advance, then it has to be constituted by virtue of one's free chosen projects and actions. Under such circumstances, authenticity resides in the wholeheartedness of a “radical choice” and of sticking to our commitment in spite of all the external menaces and distractions. To put it shortly, by remaining faithful to your choices, you are choosing yourself (i.e. you constitute your own self). Such a perspective is best exemplified by the works of Kierkegaard, especially by *Fear and Trembling*, in which the Danish philosopher analyses Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.

In order to understand the basic assumption of the decisionist model, we need to elucidate what exactly is an existential commitment. First, we need to clarify the concept of *commitment* within the decisionist model. For this, we can turn to Harry Frankfurt's famous distinction between first-order and second-order wishes¹¹. According to Frankfurt, a first-order wish is a wish for certain actions and things, a natural desire, which even an animal can have. (Most of the authentic desires from the expressivist model can easily fall in this category. But according to the decisionist model, authenticity does not reside in the blind following of first-order wishes. If authenticity means having a commitment, then one has to follow some higher-order wishes.) Second order wishes are desires for desires, which entail reflective self-evaluation. While first-order desires convey only a superficial self, second order-desires convey a real self. So, from this point of view, a commitment

¹¹ Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the will and the concept of a person”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 68; 1971, p. 5–20.

is a second-order desire which has turned into a strong resolution. For example, a commitment is my effective and lasting decision to quit smoking. This is not only a second-order desire, which falls into the category of wishful thinking (e.g. “I would like not to like smoking that much”), but an actual choice that I strongly identify with (e.g. “I actually quit smoking”).

However, as crucial as it might be, the decision to stop smoking does not necessarily make one an authentic person. To have a commitment is not enough for being true to oneself. Therefore, we must take into account a special kind of commitment, the existential one. What does “existential” mean in our decisionist model? To answer this question I will lay out three theses that can best summarize the idea of an *existential* commitment.

Firstly, in order to be existential, a commitment is linked with what Sartre and other existentialist philosophers call a “fundamental project”. A fundamental project springs from an “original choice”, a radical and primordial decision which anticipates all future decisions. As such, the fundamental project is a totalising project, which underlies and determines all the important actions of an individual. Sartre’s example of joining the French resistance and Abraham’s complete embracing of faith, are good instances of a fundamental project.

Secondly, to be existential, a commitment must entail a passionate identification with the fundamental project. Thus, every existential commitment is not just an instance of personal autonomy, but moreover an instance of authentic and effective enthusiasm. As Kierkegaard had pointed out in his writings, faith (i.e. the fundamental project) springs from the highest passion of a human being. Without such a powerful affect, an original choice cannot replicate itself in all the future choices.

Thirdly, to be existential, a commitment must be decisive in structuring an agent as a singular individual. The person who has wholeheartedly identified with her project is not an average person anymore, but a distinct individual, who had constituted her own self. The decisions and convictions, which constitute the fundamental project, are highly relevant for one’s practical identity, determining who one has become, i.e. the self that was formed by virtue of the commitment. Therefore, abandoning the commitment or not being able to live up to its demands equates with a self-abandonment, more exactly with inauthenticity. That is why the resoluteness of an individual is the most indicative token of authenticity. This is an important feature of the decisionist model, which – as we shall immediately see – marks an important difference with the experimentalist model of authenticity.

(iii) The final model of authenticity, which I have labelled as “experimentalist”, presupposes that an authentic life has to be shaped like a work of art, through the nonchalant experimentation of new values and habits, and through the revaluation of one’s particular drives. Up to a point, this model rests on the same view on the self as the decisionist one. According to this view, the self cannot be reduced to a fixed essence or to a natural inwardness that awaits to be discovered and expressed in one’s conduct. And this common assumption led many ethicists to take the

discovery/creation dichotomy for granted, without distinguishing between a decisionist and an experimentalist version of self-creation. However, there are clear differences that separate the experimentalist model of authenticity from the decisionist one. The most important difference is that, while the decisionist version takes resoluteness and persistence as key-features of authenticity, the self-reinvention model takes the experiment and the unceasing becoming as the distinctive marks of an authentic person. The most famous advocate of such a conception of authenticity is Nietzsche, with his insistence on perpetual renewal, originality, becoming and “brief habits”¹². Since a thorough examination of the German philosopher’s account of self-reinvention would be too long and demanding for the aims of this paper, I will lay out here only the basic assumptions, corollaries and normative proposals of the experimentalist model, which Nietzschean work best exemplifies.

One of the crucial assumptions of the experimentalist model is that the self is not a stable unity, but a disharmonious cluster of beliefs, impulses and inclinations. This idea was most famously suggested by Nietzsche in the *Will to Power*, where he spoke of the “subject as multiplicity”¹³. And if the self is a collection of conflicting drives, the quest for an original and substantial inwardness is a complete delusion. Hence, the best an individual can hope for is only to attain a temporary cohesion of her instincts¹⁴. Such a provisional unity could be realised in two opposing ways: either by adopting the common (Nietzsche would say “herd-like”) values and habits, or by creating one’s own table of values and pattern of habits. With this, I come to the next assumption of the experimentalist model.

The distinction between authenticity and authenticity is grafted onto the opposition between, on the one hand, blindly adopted standards and, on the other, self-determined values and habits. As such, the unity of the self is a matter of shaping a practical identity that is novel and personal. However, as novel as it should be, this fresh identity is not created *ex nihilo*, but with the available material (namely, the existing drives and affects) just like the artist is creating the work from the available material (words, colours, musical sounds etc.) That is why, in order to be authentic, the individual must explore and make use of his drives, and not to suppress them. In this process, of experimenting with herself, the agent seeks to attain a personal style and unity, which is not definitive.

Life challenges us permanently, throwing us in all kind of provoking and unparalleled situations; therefore the unity of an authentic self is not permanent. As

¹²For some authors, alongside Nietzsche’s account of brief habits, Mill’s idea of the “original experiments in living” is seen as a valid candidate for the experimentalist version of authenticity. See, for instance, Cristian Ifode, “Assessing Enhancement Technologies: Authenticity as a Social Virtue and Experiment”, *New Bioethics*, 25(1), 2019, p. 2, p.3, p. 9.

¹³Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. by W. Kaufmann, Vintage New York, 1967. §490.

¹⁴On a different occasion, I have proposed to understand the subject as multiplicity and its provisional unity as a “puzzle without solution”. See: Daniel Nica, „Subiectul modern la Nietzsche ca «puzzle fără soluție»”, *Revista de filosofie*, Tomul LXIII, No. 1, 2016.

such, the authentic individual has to reinvent herself, unmaking and remaking her practical identity more than once in a lifetime. We could say that the stake of self-reinvention is the reinvention itself. The project of self-experimentation is not a well-delimited episode, but a dynamic process, and authenticity is not a final state, but an endless motion, which incessantly perpetuates itself.

Within the experimentalist model, the only kind of resoluteness is needed is the resoluteness of continuous self-relinquishment (and this is a special type of relinquishment, which paradoxically asserts the self). Unlike the expressivist model and the decisionist one, which aim towards an ideal of “self-purity”, the experimentalist model tends towards an ideal of “self-enlargement”¹⁵. In conclusion, self-reinvention is not the same thing as the existential commitment, and the classification of authenticity is not binary, but tripartite.

Why do I think that my three-fold taxonomy is relevant for the current debates on enhancement technologies or, at least, for a part of them? The simple answer is that a rigorous taxonomy is helpful, because the standard dichotomy, wielded in the enhancement debate, tends to overlook all the nuances and intricacies of authenticity. Although, in this paper, I did not go into the thorough details of each of the three models, I think that future repudiations or endorsement of enhancement technology must take into account not only a binary opposition, but a more complex conception, which distinguishes, alongside self-discovery, two different versions of the so-called “self-creation”. Even if the future discussions will reject the enhancement technologies as threats of authenticity or, on the contrary, will defend them as enablers of self-reinvention, the experimentalist model of authenticity cannot be ignored, but must be dealt with separately.

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¹⁵ See: Rorty, Richard, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 154.

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