1 Can Feelings of Authenticity Help to Guide Virtuous Behavior?

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1.1 Introduction

Authenticity is often defined as the extent to which people feel that they know and express their true selves. Research in the psychological sciences suggests that people view true selves as more morally good than bad and that this "virtuous" true self may be a central component of authenticity. In fact, there may be reasons to suspect that authenticity serves as a cue that one's behaviors are virtuous, and feelings of authenticity may help sustain virtuous actions. However, in previous research, operationalizations of virtue may not clearly capture virtue as virtue theorists might recognize it. The possibility that feelings of authenticity keep people oriented toward virtuous activities is compatible with theorizing, but the precise ways that it might do so has not received direct conceptual or empirical scrutiny. We propose an interdisciplinary hypothesis of how feelings of authenticity could function to serve as a feedback mechanism for virtuous behavior. Feelings of authenticity could play a role in sustaining motivation to engage in virtuous activity insofar as the experience of subjective authenticity encourages one to approach that activity or environment in the future. Furthermore, virtuous behavior incorporates a few key elements that are predictive of experiencing subjective authenticity. We review emerging research that offers initial support for the idea that authenticity may guide sustained and virtuous civic action and develop a theoretical framework that positions authenticity as integral to sustained virtuous behavior.

1.2 Authenticity and Virtuous Civic Engagement

Emerging perspectives in psychological science conceptually view authenticity as the subjective experience of knowing and being one's true self (Sedikides et al. 2017). The "true" self, here, reflects people's appraisal of who they are at their core, irrespective of how they might act or what characteristics they might present publicly (Schlegel & Hicks 2011). This

emphasis on a true self concept – rather than some sort of ontologically "real" essence – makes the empirical existence of a true self irrelevant for the experience of authenticity. People generally believe that they possess a true self (Schlegel et al. 2012), experience feelings of being their true self, or are in conflict with it in the case of feeling inauthentic and are motivated to seek out experiences of feeling authentic and to avoid feelings of being inauthentic (Lenton et al. 2013).

Interestingly enough, although people's conceptions of true selves are inherently subjective, these conceptions are systematically grounded in certain kinds of attributes, as some characteristics are seen as more fundamental than others. Strohminger and Nichols (2014) provided evidence that moral traits are seen as the most essential traits of the self. Furthermore, the true self is viewed not only in moral terms but also as fundamentally morally good (Strohminger et al. 2017). People are more likely to see moral characteristics as central to true selves (Christy et al. 2017; Maffly-Kipp et al. 2023a) and perceptions of one's own moral goodness produce greater subjective awareness of one's true self than perceptions of moral badness (Christy et al. 2016). Such findings support what has become known as the "good true self bias" (De Freitas et al. 2017) and indicate that moral qualities may be particularly important for the experience of authenticity. Indeed, the attribution of virtuous attributes to true selves exists in diverse cultural settings (De Freitas et al. 2018), among people who have generally negative views of others (i.e., misanthropes; De Freitas et al. 2018), and among people who show deficits in moral reasoning and action (e.g., people relatively high in psychopathy; Maffly-Kipp et al. 2023a).

Maffly-Kipp and colleagues (2023b) recently extended work on the connection between true self conceptions and virtue to examine how authenticity might relate to civic virtue and sustained civic action. This work drew from theoretical conceptions about the virtue of (democratic) civic hope (Snow 2018), defined as "a commitment to pursuing desired ends through democratic processes and a belief that such ends are attainable" (Maffly-Kipp et al. 2023b, p. 419). The authors hypothesized that spontaneous expressions of civic hope as a virtue should correspond to greater perceptions of being authentic. Two studies supported this hypothesis. Participants who spontaneously expressed civic hope in written narratives about politics reported that civic engagement activities (e.g., voting) were more authentic and experienced greater authenticity while performing them. These studies were the first to explicitly connect a civic virtue (hope) to authenticity and, perhaps most critically, utilized a novel methodological approach to do so. Civic hope in these studies was operationalized through a narrative coding methodology that was developed through interdisciplinary discussions between social psychologists and philosophers. Participants wrote narratives in a context that did not explicitly inquire about civic hope or

virtue. Coders identified expressions of civic hope according to an objective scheme (see Maffly-Kipp et al. 2023b) that was developed to capture virtue expression in a way that a virtue ethicist would recognize. This methodological approach circumvented some of the pitfalls of other work on authenticity and morality by substantially mitigating the social desirability demand to appear virtuous and by allowing for the spontaneous expression of civic hope. Thus, these studies not only connect civic hope to feelings of authenticity but also provide a more robust demonstration of the empirical connection between virtue expression and authenticity.

Of course, to say that authenticity may be integral to sustained motivation and engagement, there must be evidence that authenticity prospectively predicts continued engagement. Gause and colleagues (2023) have done that in a 12-week longitudinal study. These authors built on documented connections between authenticity and motivational constructs like intrinsic motivation (Goldman & Kernis 2002), interest (Dormanen et al. 2020), work engagement (Sutton 2020), and inspiration (Lenton et al. 2013) to hypothesize that authenticity would *prospectively* predict civic engagement through enhanced motivation. Each week, they asked participants to indicate how frequently they engaged in a variety of civic engagement activities (e.g., participating in boycotts, reading about politics), how motivated they were to engage in them over the following week, and how authentic they felt while performing them. Linear mixed model analyses revealed that current week authenticity predicted a greater motivation to engage in civic activities over the next week, which, in turn, predicted more engagement with those activities in the subsequent week. These findings indicate that experiencing authenticity when performing civic activities (e.g., participating in boycotts) *prospectively* predicts the likelihood of performing those activities in the future. These findings illustrate the potential importance of authenticity for promoting sustained engagement in the civic sphere.

But why? The answer to that question, while central to our understanding of how authenticity operates psychologically, is relatively less clear. Part of the ambiguity derives from a lack of theorizing about what authenticity is and how it might operate in a motivational and self-regulatory framework. That is, the progression of authenticity research has largely flowed from construct development and validation (e.g., Goldman & Kernis 2002; Wood et al. 2008), to the identification of close correlates (e.g., see Hicks et al. 2019), to the nature of the experience (Lenton et al. 2013) and its potential importance (e.g., Rivera et al. 2019). Yet, while a conception of authenticity as a subjective feeling (Sedikides et al. 2017) has emerged, explicit theorizing about the function or utility of those feelings has not followed. It is clear from the empirical work that authenticity has some motivational properties that might help sustain virtuous activity. In what follows, we attempt to develop an initial framework for understanding why and how those properties emerge.

1.3   How Might Feelings of Authenticity Contribute to Sustained Motivation?

1.3.1   *Role of Feelings of State Authenticity*

The feeling of authenticity relates to whether one is in touch with their "true self", and "subjective authenticity" specifically refers to people's perceptions of whether they are expressing who they truly are, and regardless of the accuracy of this perception (Vess 2019). Kim et al. (2019) discuss what factors lead to the experience of subjective authenticity in terms of two competing models, trait and state, and the evidence that favors the latter. They note:

> Recently, Fleeson and Wilt (2010) articulated two competing hypotheses related to the origins of subjective authenticity. The trait-consistency hypothesis suggests that people feel most authentic when they act in accordance with their dispositional traits. . . . By comparison, the state-content significance hypothesis suggests one's current behavior facilitates feelings of authenticity rather than the congruence between one's behavior and dispositional traits. Fleeson and Wilt found strong support for the state-content significance hypothesis across three studies.
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> (pp. 165–166)

Insofar as recent research finds support for state authenticity, and less so for trait authenticity, the approach taken here will be concerned with subjective authenticity on the state-content model.

According to this view of state authenticity, Kim et al. (2019) suggest that "certain behaviors feel more natural and less constrained by external influences. When individuals engage in these actions, their subsequent psychological mindsets contribute to the expression of core values and thus enhance subjective authenticity" (p. 166). Much of the research in this area suggests that a lack of conflict (within oneself, or between oneself and others) facilitates this feeling of subjective authenticity. The lack of inner conflict may contribute to the feeling of one's behavior being "natural" and being at ease in one's social conditions may contribute to feeling that one is able to be "true to oneself."

Schmader and Sedikides (2018) offer a model of this connection as "*State Authenticity as Fit between one's identity and the Environment (SAFE)*". They argue:

> [S]tate authenticity has a proximal effect on an immediate decision to approach or avoid the situation, either in the present or the future. More distal effects on performance, well-being, and relationships are

likely to be dependent on the decision to select or avoid a situation and will often involve a complex set of trade-offs.

(2018, p. 243)

So, for example, if one feels a fit between one's moral values and a particular situation or environment, this could lead to feelings of authenticity, which in turn would provide greater motivation to approach that situation or environment again in the future.

1.3.2   Role of Affect in General

The conception of authenticity as a feeling state (Sedikides et al. 2017) is critical insofar as it invites consideration of how those feelings might operate in ways akin to other feelings (e.g., affect). In self-regulation, for example, affect and emotion play at least two key roles. First, there's a motivational role affect can play in helping us to act consistently with our goals and standards. As Bandura (1999) explains: "self-regulatory control is achieved by creating incentives for one's own actions and by anticipative affective reactions to one's own behavior depending on how it measures up to personal standards" (p. 176). In general, when we achieve goals or uphold moral standards, this feels good. But if an act we are considering taking (or have already taken) would violate our moral standards, this can trigger feelings of self-sanction, such as guilt or shame, which either help to deter the action ahead of time, or if felt afterwards will hopefully prompt a different course of action in the future.

Second, it's important to highlight those affective reactions are a form of feedback about whether you are maintaining your standards (or making progress toward your goal). With respect to this second role, Carver and Scheier (1990) claim:

[E]motions intrinsically are related to goal values, and that they reflect differences between expected and experienced rates of movement toward (or away from) those goals. They represent an organismic monitoring of "how things are going" with respect to those values.

(p. 33)

In this sense, negative affect plays a crucial feedback role in alerting us that something has gone awry and signaling that we might need to take action in response. By contrast, positive affect is signaling that we're doing better than we might have expected (or predicted) with regards to making progress toward a goal or in satisfying enduring goals (or needs). This could provide a reason for placing a greater value or higher priority on that goal, as well as enhancing motivation for greater engagement in the activity or environment in which this positive affect was experienced.

We consider the experience of authenticity to be similarly affect laden. Feelings of authenticity (or inauthenticity) provide positive (or negative) feedback about the activity one is engaged in. So, a feeling of authenticity would be a signal that the activity that one is engaged in is meaningful or expressive of moral values, whereas a feeling of inauthenticity would signal a disconnect or even potentially a conflict between one's actions and moral values. Feeling authentic would provide a reason to value that activity and motivation to continue engaging in it, whereas feeling inauthentic could motivate changing one's behavior or disengaging from that goal. In this way, we view feelings of authenticity as a feedback mechanism that gives people information about whether their actions are likely to result in fulfillment. Such a possibility is consistent with a "true self as guide" lay theory (Rivera et al. 2019) that explicitly connects authenticity to the "good life". Authenticity should therefore direct motivation and action toward activities that are fulfilling and rewarding, ultimately functioning as a signal to continue engaging in that action. This could help to explain the results Gause et al. (2023) found with experiences of authenticity while performing civic activities prospectively predicting the likelihood of performing those activities in the future.

1.4   Why Think That Virtue Expression Might Facilitate Feelings of Subjective Authenticity?

1.4.1   *Authenticity and Morality*

Insofar as feelings of subjective authenticity can contribute to sustained motivation, we next provide reasons to think that the expression of virtue is likely to facilitate such feelings. There are at least two elements to virtue that have also been found to precede experiences of subject authenticity – acting morally and having a promotion focus. Given that feeling authentic is seen as being true to oneself, and the true self is viewed as essentially morally good, it's plausible that actions that are viewed as morally good would be seen as being true to oneself, and so could give rise to feelings of authenticity.

In addition to the true self being viewed as morally good, connections have also been demonstrated more directly between perceptions of morality and feelings of authenticity. For example, Christy et al. (2016) examined the "morality of *behavior* as a predictor of *perceptions* of a component of authenticity (i.e., subjective self-knowledge)" (p. 2), and they found that "people feel more or less in touch with their true self depending on how morally/immorally they believed they behaved" (p. 9). So, when people believed they have acted morally, this contributed to them experiencing subjective authenticity. Interestingly, this effect

emerged even after controlling for self-esteem, indicating that the link between perceptions of morality and authenticity may not be due to egoistic positive self-feelings. Overall, these findings are consistent with Newman et al.'s (2014) characterization of the belief in the morally good true self as the thought that "deep inside every individual, there is a 'true self' motivating him or her to behave in ways that are virtuous" (211). Thus, when someone acts morally, they can feel they are in touch with their true self, whereas immoral acts would be seen as a departure from one's true self.

Another potential connection between authenticity and morality may be found in how they are both considered to be central components of living a good life. In virtue theory, acquiring and exercising the virtues is considered to be partially constitutive of what it is to live well as a human being. We might expect there to be a connection between authenticity and living well, at least when acting morally gives rise to experiences of subjective authenticity, and there's some evidence for a perceived link between being authentic and living a good life. This link is highlighted by the "true-self-as-guide" (TSAG) lay theory (Rivera et al. 2019):

> A TSAG lay theory reflects conventional wisdom that people should "look inside" themselves for guidance (e.g., "follow who you are") and that finding congruence between a choice and the true self will result in personal meaning and satisfaction . . . whereby people *believe* that it is important to live their lives according to their true selves and that *perceptions* of living up to this ideal are consequential for well-being.
>
> (p. 117)

It's an advantage that this TSAG lay theory is a nonveridical account of why subjective authenticity matters, as it does not require there to be an actual "true self" or for there to be actual (veridical) congruence between one's decisions and one's values (though there might be). What matters is that people are using feelings of subjective authenticity "as a cue to evaluate whether they are living up to a shared cultural value of what it means to live a good life" (Rivera et al. 2019, p. 114). So, being true to oneself is viewed as an effective guide to decision-making that helps one to live a good life, and feelings of subjective authenticity are an indicator that one is being true to oneself. This would imply that people are motivated to seek out and engage in activities that feel authentic because of the lay belief that this will be more meaningful and fulfilling.

Given the conventional wisdom expressed in the TSAG lay theory, we might expect that people are looking for opportunities to engage in authentic activities in order to help them live well. But how would someone look inside themselves for guidance? In other words, what could be taken

as a signal of congruence between one's choices and one's true self? We believe the subjective feeling of authenticity serves as a cue to this type of congruency, and people use this feeling to help guide future decisions. That is, subjective feelings of authenticity help individuals judge the associated activity as a potential path to fulfillment and well-being, promoting sustained motivation to engage in that activity.

1.4.2   *Authenticity and Promotion-Focused Goals*

Insofar as people are motivated to seek out activities that feel authentic and express virtue, a distinction in self-regulatory theory is likely relevant for understanding what gives rise to feelings of authenticity. This distinction concerns whether someone's focus is on promoting a desired outcome versus preventing an undesired outcome. Higgins (1997) explains:

> Because a promotion focus involves a sensitivity to positive outcomes (their presence and absence), an inclination to approach matches to desired end-states is the natural strategy for promotion self-regulation. In contrast, because a prevention focus involves a sensitivity to negative outcomes (their absence and presence), an inclination to avoid mismatches to desired end-states is the natural strategy for prevention self-regulation.
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> (p. 1282)

So, a prevention-focused goal implies maintaining one's existing state and trying to avoid losses relative to that state. A promotion-focused goal, by contrast, implies trying to improve upon one's existing state, such that one focuses more on gains and progress.

Kim et al. (2019) provided evidence that those with a promotion focus experience more feelings of subjective authenticity than did those with a prevention focus. They explain that "[s]ince promotion focus is linked to people's beliefs about their ideal self and nurturance (Higgins 1998), it should naturally direct people to the pursuit of their potentialities (e.g., aptitudes and talents) and ultimately authenticity" (p. 174). Insofar as a promotion focus is linked to reaching our ideals, this would lend itself more directly to feeling like one is expressing one's true self, than would a prevention focus which is linked to obligations one is trying to avoid violating. For example, Valle et al. (2019) studied the effects of this regulatory focus difference in terms of employment goals (e.g., maintain the status quo or seek advancement) and the willingness to engage in unethical behavior on the job, and found that those with a prevention focus engaged more frequently in moral disengagement and unethical behavior.

1.4.3   *Virtue as a Moral Goal With a Promotion Focus*

The promotion–prevention distinction in the structure of a goal should be expected to make a significant difference in the types of moral behavior one is motivated to display, and to what extent one is motivated to improve. For example, a promotion-focused goal of being kind involves striving to become a kinder person, whereas a prevention-focused goal might be limited to just avoiding any action that would count as cruel (to preserve a view of oneself as kind). So, this distinction in focus can motivate very different types of behavior despite the goals both being expressed in terms of kindness. Given that virtues are conceptualized as acquired excellences which take experience and practice to develop, virtuous goals would need to be formulated with a promotion focus, to motivate improving upon one's current degree of virtue (Krettenauer & Stichter 2023).

This regulatory distinction also has implications for dealing with moral failure. Moral failures can be viewed as opportunities for learning and improvement (Stichter 2020). For people who possess a higher promotion focus, failures would not be as distressing as compared to failures with a prevention focus. By contrast, for those with a prevention-focused moral goal, the goal is to preserve a positive view of one's morality. This would provide strong motivation for avoidance behavior, in terms of it being most important to avoid being viewed as having acted immorally, so as not to be judged negatively and possibly drawing condemnation from others. This may also motivate behaving in ways that are uncritical and conformist, to lessen the chances of doing something which others might see as being morally wrong. Since virtues represent ideals to aspire to embodying, rather than mere obligations to avoid breaking, they again should be conceptualized as having a promotion focus (Stichter 2021). For these reasons, we should expect that acting on virtuous goals is likely to give rise to feelings of authenticity, since doing so incorporates at least two important types of content that have been found to precede experiences of state authenticity – acting morally and having a promotion focus.

1.5   Conclusion

We have proposed a general hypothesis of how feelings of authenticity might function to serve as a feedback mechanism for virtuous behavior, and this framework can help to illuminate the specific results of empirical studies that support the idea that authenticity can guide sustained and virtuous civic action. We conclude with a few thoughts about potential limitations and directions for future research related to civic engagement. First, in

arguing that authenticity has some motivational properties that can help sustain virtuous activity, given the subjective nature of authenticity and true self conceptions, we don't claim that experiences of subjective authenticity will necessarily track objectively virtuous behavior. People's perceptions of the morality of their actions can be subject to bias, especially with various forms of moral disengagement mechanisms that enable one to reconstrue an immoral act as morally neutral or even morally praiseworthy (Bandura 2016). It might be interesting to explore whether feelings of inauthenticity – rather than other mechanisms such as self-esteem protection – might trigger moral disengagement and other kinds of defensive responses to moral shortcomings.

Second, also regarding the subjective nature of authenticity, there's no guarantee that one will feel authentic about engaging in civic action (though if one does then we have presented reasons to expect it will help to sustain that activity). It's possible that one's view of oneself and what a good life consists in would steer one away from civic engagement. Though if Aristotle was right about humans being social and political animals, and that the polis can help to encourage virtue development in citizens (notwithstanding his discriminatory views about who ought to count as a citizen), it might be expected that being true to oneself would lead people toward civic engagement – at least if such activities were conducive to supporting virtue development and expression.

Furthermore, in a time where there is much uncivil behavior in politics, people might face a dilemma between remaining engaged in political activity and discourse that promotes uncivil behavior or withdrawing from civic engagement altogether. We hope that being uncivil feels inauthentic to people, rather than authentic. But in that case, studies suggest that when people have to express characteristics that feel inauthentic to them, this can then lead to less motivation to remain engaged in that activity or setting. For example, in one study on women applying for positions in an STEM field, which often encourages stereotypically masculine characteristics, women who were primed in the study to express more masculine characteristics reported lower levels of authenticity, and as a consequence less interest in pursuing that position (Dormanen et al. 2020). It could also be the case that the abandonment of civic engagements results from cultural shifts in how those activities are perceived to allow for virtuous outcomes (e.g., believing that civic action is always corrupted by elites), which would consequently frame them as lacking virtue and authenticity. To return to a model of state authenticity as a fit between one's values and one's environment, it's important that the political environment is such that people can feel like engaging in political action and discourse can be done in a way that fits (rather than conflicts) with their moral values and encourages virtuous behaviors toward fellow citizens.

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