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# Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal

Somogy Varga



# **Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal**

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# **Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal**

**Somogy Varga**

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**In loving memory of Ilona Varga**



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# Introduction

All concepts of authenticity relate to some extent to the basic meaning of the word ‘authentic,’ which is used either in a strong sense of ‘undisputed origin or authorship’ or in the weaker sense of ‘faithful to an original’ or ‘reliable, accurate representation.’ This is far from the whole picture however. A brief look at historical connotations provides a richer range of meaning. The Greek *authentikos* derives from the noun *authentēs*, “doer, master,” which was built from two parts, from *autos*, “self,” and *-hentes*, “worker, doer, being.” It simply meant “authoritative” before the late eighteenth century when it developed into the modern meaning, which also involves the idea of ‘genuine.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals four layers of meaning that still reverberate in current usage: as being authenticated (thus authoritative or suitably authorized); as being in accordance with a given fact; as referring to some authorship; or as being ‘real’ and not a result of replication or pretense. When assessing the value, authorship or legal status of documents, works of art, or archeological findings, and generally in situations when an original entity is compared to potential copies, this term appears useful and perfectly intelligible.

However, distinguishing the authentic and inauthentic is highly context-dependent. Denis Dutton (2003) argues that the use of the term “authentic” in aesthetics groups into two categories. In this context, we may speak of *nominal authenticity* when establishing that a work of art is correctly identified in terms of origins, authorship, or provenance. Additionally, we may speak of *expressive authenticity* when discussing the artifact’s character being a genuine expression of the author’s beliefs or central values in a given socio-historical context.

Matters are even more complicated when authenticity is used as an ethical characteristic attributed to human agents. What is it to be oneself, or to be at one with oneself? Any reflection on ‘who we really are’ discloses a multiplicity of puzzles connecting to metaphysics, semantics, and epistemology. In a straightforward sense, being oneself is inescapable, since whenever thinking a thought, making a decision, or acting in a certain way, one is identical with the subject of those thoughts, decisions, and acts.

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They are one's own. But in a more sophisticated sense, while someone may acknowledge being identical with the subject of those thoughts, decisions, or acts, she may be inclined to say that some of those are 'not really hers,' thus denying that those thoughts, decisions or acts are expressive of who she really is. At this point, the 'mineness' in question goes beyond the metaphysical sense and acquires its meaning by connecting to a moral-psychological dimension.

While authenticity in this sense is indisputably a slippery concept that is difficult to get a grip on, that is nevertheless what will be attempted here. As a first rough approximation, we deploy the term when describing a person who acts in a way that we think of as faithful to herself and her principles. Such a person acts on impulses and ideals that are not only hers (as bearing her authorship), but that are also expressions of who she really is. It is in this sense that Bernard Williams defines authenticity simply as "the idea that some things are in some real sense really you, or express what you are, and others aren't" (quoted in Guignon 2004: viii).

### UNDERSTANDING AUTHENTICITY: MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

In this general sense, the concept of authenticity naturally connects with philosophical discussions about autonomy. Autonomy emphasizes an individual's self-governing abilities, and the capacity to reliably follow *self-imposed* principles, which are employed independently of one's position in political and social structures (Schneewind 1998). Kantian 'moral autonomy' is limited to issues of moral obligation and refers to imposing a moral law on oneself, while 'personal autonomy' refers to leading a life according to one's own reasons and motives that are not products of manipulative external forces. In the broad sense, personal autonomy refers to putting one's behavior under reflexive scrutiny and making it dependent on self-determined goals (Honneth 1994: 59), when dealing not just with the strictly moral, but with a very broad variety of aspects of life (Dworkin 1988: 23–47). Beyond referring to leading an autonomous life, guided by non-constrained reasons and motives, authenticity introduces a second normative aspect. The motives and reasons I am moved by and act on should not only be of unconstrained origin, but also be expressive of my personality—of the person I take myself to be. I can act self-determinedly and lead an autonomous life (in the Kantian sense), while my actual actions and indeed my way of living can still fail to express the person I understand myself to be. Authenticity thus involves another ability beyond autonomy or self-determination, namely orientation, in terms of distinguishing between peripheral and core personal commitments, principles, wishes, or feelings that are truly worth following.

Authenticity is also a nexus where the question of the 'good life' and philosophical inquiry connect. In some Greek and Roman traditions, this was considered one of the most important goals in philosophy. With the

emergence of modernity, the topic of the good life has lost its central position. On the one hand, such an undertaking was considered much too vague. On the other hand, it became susceptible to the criticism of putative paternalism, seeking to prescribe pre-defined paths of life for individuals. The revival of the concept in philosophical debate is connected to a change occurring in ethics over the last few decades (Taylor 1989; 1991; Nussbaum 1994; Seel 1991; 1993; Cottingham 1998). Elizabeth Anscombe's paper "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958) marks a turning point in conceptualizing normative theories. Basically, she criticizes the preoccupation of modern moral philosophy with a law-based conception of ethics that operates with terms like obligation and duty. In her view, the approach to ethics which relies upon universal principles (Mill's utilitarianism, Kant's deontology) results in a stiff moral code that does not match modern societies. Instead, Anscombe calls for a return to Aristotelian ideas of the good life. This marks a revival of normative ethics after a period in which modern ethics focused on either descriptive method or linguistic and conceptual analysis of concepts like the 'good' (Steinfath 1998; Dohmen 2003). In discussion with the discourse ethics of Jürgen Habermas, the contract ethics of John Rawls, or recent utilitarianism, authors like Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum pose the classical Aristotelian question of the 'good life' once again.

The view that this book will defend is that practical philosophy, and most certainly critical social philosophy, cannot get off the ground without reflecting on the nature of the good life and well-being. Any philosophical undertaking that aims to illuminate the standards by which we pass normative judgments on the quality of self-relations and social relations needs some recourse to an idea of human flourishing, well-being, and thus the good life. Such an idea is necessary in order to explicate the point of social integration and political institutions. However, in order to avoid paternalism such an idea must be formulated carefully and as formally as possible. Therefore, practical philosophy should not involve a particular idea of the good life, but rather focus on the formal and constitutive *conditions* of such a good life. In this formalized sense, even Kant and Habermas make recourse to the constitutive conditions of the good life (for example the particular self-determined participation in social praxis) that provides the reference point for the impartial treatment of others (Seel 1997). Importantly, reaching beyond Kant, Habermas does not focus solely on strict universalizability, but on normative consensus, and goes beyond the idea of pure justice to include "those structural aspects of the 'good life' which can be separated from the concrete totality of particular forms of life" (Outhwaite 1994: 55). My preoccupation with the issue of authenticity has a clear connection to this debate, because the question concerning the formal conditions of the 'good life' can be answered in two ways: in the vocabulary of autonomy and in the vocabulary of authenticity. So, while I share with Habermas the aim of identifying the 'structural aspects of the

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good life,' I will spell it out not in the vocabulary of autonomy but in the vocabulary of authenticity, which I think is most adequate to contemporary social reality.

In addition, authenticity is also much more than a topic in ethical or moral philosophical debates, and in order to fully grasp it we should not restrict our inquiry to these fields. Besides being a theme in philosophy, authenticity—at least in the Western world—is a ubiquitous *ideal*, a way of conceptualizing the practice of the self to achieve a good life. The rise of authenticity as an ideal is closely connected to the rise of modernity and modern technology. Concerning the authenticity of objects, Walter Benjamin has rightly pointed out that authenticity is a product of modernity, in that it is only against the background of the radical reproducibility of objects and works of art that the modern concept of authenticity becomes intelligible in the first place. Benjamin (1973) describes how authenticity emerges as an ideal, as something we care about and are attentive to in a historical situation permeated by a “loss of the aura.” It is in this sense, and in that particular historical context, that this value-laden concept becomes a powerful ideal, something that is seen as worth pursuing. It is not by chance that this question surfaces in late modernity in a particularly powerful manner. Habermas maintains that the processes of disenchantment and the differentiation of value spheres have led to a situation characterized by the plurality of goodness, in which it is impossible to formulate an overarching idea of the human good. In fact, reasonable disagreement regarding ideals of the good life is a characteristic of the modern condition (Larmore 1996; Forst 2007). It is in this context that the ideal of authenticity emerges, embodying a certain individualistic vision of the good that ties in with a particular socio-historical situation.

In his work on American cultural history, Miles Orwell discusses authenticity as a product of modernity and draws attention to the great impact it has had on contemporary societies. At the same time he notes that “we have a hunger for something like authenticity, but are easily satisfied by an ersatz facsimile” (Orwell 1989: xxiii). Importantly, in the second part of the sentence, he addresses the issue of suspicion, which stems from authenticity being a product of modernity and which has been an integral part of the ideal of authenticity ever since. The fear that the ‘authentic’ might turn out to be a ‘fake,’ a product of reproduction, has followed the ideal as its shadow. When emphasizing these two sides, Orwell sees authenticity as characterized by the simultaneous experience of desire and fear, which is a formative experience of modernity. Richard Rorty (1989: 24) also notices this intertwining of desire (for authenticity) and fear (of inauthenticity, self-deception), and quoting Allan Bloom, he points to what he says is one of the greatest fears of modern man, namely the “horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica.” Still, even with this ambivalent undertone, authenticity has continuously gained momentum and turned into a highly esteemed ideal that has shaped the way we relate to others and ourselves.

Although overshadowed by this intertwining of fear and desire, authenticity has become a prevalent ethical ideal that tries to give answers to the question of how to lead a good life under the conditions of modernity. It is in this sense that Theodor W. Adorno, in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973), deals with authenticity as a problematic way of dealing with the normative gaps caused by modernity. Seeking answers to the question of how to live a good life, the vocabulary of authenticity has in our contemporary cultural context become what the notion of autonomous subjectivity was to early modernity. The “age of autonomy” that emphasized the individual’s self-governing abilities is replaced by what Charles Taylor (2007: 472; also Ferrara 1998) called “the age of authenticity.” The ideal of authenticity—that one should be *true to oneself and lead a life that is expressive of what the person takes herself to be*—has become a strong and widespread ethical ideal, as contemporary thinkers like Lasch, Taylor, Ferrara, and Guignon have noted. It has become a part of Western thought and practice, and it has contributed to the shaping of the modern worldview. In addition, the ideal of authenticity has also had an immense impact on popular culture, most revealingly and directly manifested in the quest for self-realization in the popular selfhelp movement. Simultaneously with this great impact, many have noted that the ideal of authenticity has deformed and turned into aestheticism and egoistic self-indulgence. As Guignon (2004: 81) eloquently puts it,

when the older idea of privileged access to a higher truth is abandoned, as it is in our contemporary thinking, what is left is a glorification of intensity and “mineness” as goods in themselves, no matter what their content might be. We are then inclined to think of authenticity as a purely personal virtue, one aimed at firming up the boundaries of one’s own self, or at strengthening one’s powers of self-assertion, or at affirming one’s own worth as an individual, or at some other purely personal end.

This parallel emphasis and deformation of authenticity becomes slightly more intelligible when we consider that due to the differentiation of value spheres, contemporary lives unfold in a social space characterized by a plurality of the good.

## THE MAIN IDEA

This book shares a fundamental assumption with these thinkers. There is reason to re-qualify the concept of authenticity and to discern its applicable nucleus from other features that have been subsumed under this label and that now muddle the picture. Therefore, a major aim of this book is to construct *a formal concept of authenticity* that can detect and identify aestheticism and atomist self-indulgence as distortions. However, the aims of the book surpass the ambitions of earlier attempts, since authenticity

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will provide the normative backbone of a critical social theory that is able to identify not only aestheticism and egoistic self-indulgence, but other and more complex practices of the self and patterns of societal interactions shaped by contemporary capitalism. Additionally, while I share the ‘attitude of suspicion’ prevalent among these authors, this will unfold more radically, inspired by the critical gesture of first-generation critical thinkers like Adorno and Benjamin.

What I will show is not only that practices of the self rely on a ‘deformed’ concept of authenticity and therefore ‘malfunction.’ Rather, by examining contemporary practices of the self on the job market (propagated in the self-help and self-management literature) I will argue that authenticity, far from ‘malfunctioning,’ actually functions quite well as a ‘social technology’ that helps enhance production. In fact, contemporary methods of work, organization, and production have adopted authenticity as an important part of their manoeuvres, making it an important factor of production in the post-Fordist economy. In this context, authenticity is both an important factor in the context of emerging forms of consumption, advertising, and marketing, and it has also become a factor in the economic utilization of subjective capacities. In this process, there is a reciprocal shaping of capitalism and the ideal of authenticity. To my knowledge, despite the impact of authenticity and some philosophical interest, we do not have an analytical tool that manages this vital aspect. However, given the goal of constructing a concept of authenticity that may provide the normative backbone of a critical social theory, this is necessary.

The concept of authenticity proposed here will be contextualized and normatively embedded within the framework of critical social theory as ‘Gesellschaftskritik.’ Nonetheless, to work out the core of the concept, I will draw heavily on moral philosophy and discussions on personal autonomy. In this context, the concept of authenticity will be discussed as the *practice of autonomy*.

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE BOOK

The book is made up of three parts with each providing answers to these questions.

#### Part I **Chapters 1 and 2**

I will start by offering a historical overview of the emergence and development of the concept of authenticity, since insight into the historical scaffolding of ideas from which authenticity emerged will help establish a grip on this concept and to explain its enormous appeal and impact. Rather than attempting a comprehensive review of the history of the concept, which would itself require a book of its own, my approach will be systematic,

contrasting authenticity with other related notions such as *sincerity* and *autonomy*. The chapter will culminate in a comprehensive discussion of thinkers who have fiercely rejected the concept and those who have warmly embraced it. In that context, the unique approach of this book will be further clarified.

**Chapter 2** raises the question of how a normative account of authenticity can be theoretically framed, which is necessary in order to construct *a formal concept of authenticity* that can serve as a critical concept. I will draw on critical social philosophy that relies on normatively grounded evaluative predicates against which distorted practices become visible. This provides the link between capitalism, authenticity and social criticism. The most important aim will be to find adequate theoretical justification for a critical concept of authenticity. For this I will assess several available models, from Rousseau to contemporary critical social theorists. One of the most challenging issues within this task is to establish evaluative predicates that can legitimately claim some supra-contextual validity and do not embody a particular and historically contingent vision of the good, thereby avoiding paternalism. This will involve taking a critical stand on the foundations of current theories, most prominently Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. While I will draw on the rich sources in this tradition, I will also contribute to sharpening its analytical gaze. I will argue that the concept of authenticity developed here is a needed element at the center of a theory of recognition.

## Part II Chapters 3, 4, and 5

Having clarified the general normative frame within which authenticity shall be reconstructed, I turn to the second problem, namely the question of how such a formal account of authenticity could be made explicit. The issue at hand will be approached from the perspective of moral philosophy and psychology and I will attempt to assess what I will refer to as 'inner sense' and 'productionist' models of authenticity. Roughly, the inner sense model originates with Rousseau and claims that authenticity is about the introspective identification of central inner features that define who we are. In the productionist model, which can be traced back to Nietzsche, emphasis is laid on the aesthetic creation of difference, modeled on the production of art. I will show why such approaches cannot answer the question of who we really are; this is simply not satisfactorily captured in terms of discovery or self-production. This is why I will seek to construct an account that integrates positive features from both models, while avoiding some of the pitfalls. Rather than being about the uniqueness of the self, discovered (inner sense) or created (productionism), authenticity is connected to the (wholehearted) manner in which we engage with our lives, integrating our lives by projects that we wholeheartedly endorse.

Saying that our commitments define who we are and the consequent emphasis upon our agency in the choices of such commitments compels us

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to embrace the voluntarist position, which basically holds that who we are is a matter of choice. [Chapter 4](#) will deal with this issue, in an attempt to accommodate the constitutive agency of the subject while simultaneously arguing that the relationship between our commitments and the collective background of values (horizon of significance) is of constitutive nature. The decisive take will be to think of agency as inherently ‘embedded,’ which will allow accommodating both the intuition that the agent has some constitutive power and the idea that authenticity is inherently connected to the articulation of goods from a collective horizon. Similarly, an examination of the structure of our commitments shall provide insights about the normative sources of our commitments. The guiding intuition is that the internal structure of our commitments commits us to more than what merely we happen to care about; it can constrain the manner in which we can pursue our commitment and even determine the mode of our practical deliberation.

[Chapter 5](#) will be concerned with the analysis of those situations in which we make the kind of ‘existential’ choices that articulate who we are. I shall deploy this term in a non-voluntaristic sense and argue that existential choices are prominent and emblematic when expressing who we are, and that they have an exceptionally complex phenomenology, characterized by a sense of necessity. In such choices, described as ‘alternativeless choices,’ we articulate who we are, bringing into reality some tacit intuitions that often only take on a gestalt-like formation. We shall also see what inauthenticity amounts to and how those changes or existential reorientations occur in which our fundamental commitments change.

It is in this chapter that the definition of a formal concept of authenticity will be completed. Such a formal concept will neither assume that authenticity is about being at one with some pre-existing and determinate inner norm, nor that it is about the consistency of an aesthetically self-created style of life. The account shall adopt a relaxed universalist method while blocking the charge of paternalism—two characteristics that qualify our concept as one that can be fruitfully deployed in critical inquiry.

### **Part III Chapter 6**

In the sixth and last chapter, I will attempt to fill a gap that I think contemporary accounts of authenticity leave open. It will be argued that insufficient attention is paid to how the ideal of authenticity and certain practices in capitalism have shaped each other reciprocally. It is at this point that the formal concept of authenticity will be put to work as a critical concept, against which problematic practices become intelligible.

The main concern will be that the ambivalence around the ideal of authenticity, the intertwining of desire and fear that has accompanied the ideal of authenticity, is today more than justified. The fear connected to the ideal of authenticity is no longer just about the fear that we satisfy ourselves with facsimile (Orwell) or just about the fear that the ideal of

authenticity will lose its initial moral dimensions (Charles Taylor). Instead, I will argue that a new kind of fear is justified. Due to the reciprocal shaping of capitalism and the ideal of authenticity, pathological conditions no longer arise from the societal barriers that inhibit authenticity, as Freud thought, but from the practice of authenticity itself. In order to show this, I will examine the popular ‘self-help’ discourse and point out a recent transformation regarding the concept of authenticity, namely the emergence of a *performative* model of authenticity. As a second step, drawing on Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, and Axel Honneth, a framework will be constructed that renders the emergence of a performative model of authenticity intelligible. I shall argue that this model has made possible what I will call a *paradoxical turn*. Authenticity, once used to question the legitimacy of hierarchical institutions and to target the power of capitalistic requirements, now seems to function as an institutionalized demand towards subjects, matching the systemic demands of contemporary capitalism. As a third and final step, a link will be suggested between this development and a specific form of psychological suffering. The aim is to show that the constant activity of *performing authenticity* exhausts the self and that this may explain some of the preconditions that made possible the rapid rise in the frequency of depression and sales of pharmaceutical anti-depressants. Consequently, the last chapter of this book will attempt to live up to the overall critical social philosophical aim of this book. By using the previously constructed formal concept of authenticity, I will attempt to explicate the pathological consequences of the contemporary practice of authenticity. Hopefully the concept developed in this book can prove to be a measure against which pathological practices of authenticity become comprehensible.

## A METHODOLOGICAL REMARK

In the course of this inquiry I will be drawing on different traditions such as critical social theory, phenomenology, and analytical philosophy, using a ‘post-analytic’ methodological approach to move beyond the analytic/Continental divide. The aim is to retain the rigor that characterizes the ‘analytic tradition’ while holding on to the hermeneutic-historical strength of the ‘Continental tradition.’

