

The Concept of Authenticity in the Politico-Philosophical Discourse of Modernity

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Abstract

This study explores the notion of authenticity in the ancient-greek philosophical discourse. In this discourse, the postulate of an authentic life is inextricably linked with the teleology of happy life and, hence, the teleology of the autarkic polis. In the discourse of modernity, it is observed that the notion of authenticity is disentangled from the collective claim for autarkic polis. The notions is depoliticized profoundly, since the desideratum is no longer the proactive involvement of the citizen in the public affairs. So, authenticity is, basically, placed in the custody of a lonely life, which cannot provide a clear answer to the question concerning the existence of meaning in life.

Keywords: Authenticity, Antiquity, Modernity, Care for the Self, Happy Life.

1. The self-sovereign subject as a postulate of an autarkic life in antiquity.

The grandeur of the discourse on authenticity stems from its programmatic relation to the postulate of realization of a happy life. The interplay between the authentic subject and a deeper philosophical ethos of a comprehensive aesthetics of the existence is rooted in the ancient greek philosophy and the broader context of a comprehensive culturedness of the self. The idea of *Care for the Self* is an age-old thematics of the greek culture (*ἐαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι*) and pertains to each person's arduous learning from their relation to their self: a return to the self means, first and foremost, an indissoluble and unalienable connection with one's very self, which promises access to the truth and a specific way of being. This required a series of practices of self-care that included not least physical exertion and labour. Fundamental intellectual and bodily practices invested the *lesouci de soi* with a hue of momentousness as the epicenter of thought and a form of uneasiness about a comprehensive access to the self. The underpinning for subjectivity did give "ontological primacy" to the self in relation to the others, but this did not mean that self-care excluded the multifarious relationships with the others. The other is declared omnipresent in the self-care and, in this respect, one's existence does not preclude mutual or graded friendship bondings.

The french philosopher Michael Foucault noted the ontological primacy of the self as a potential interpretation of the authenticity of existence in the ancient greek thought. His view appears as loyal to a form of aesthetic individualism, in which the individual alone ought to relate to its self in a continuous and internal manner. No one else can ever help in the realization of self-care practices, except for a proactive subject who reflects and poses a probing question to their self. The subject is portrayed in Foucault as *se déprendre de soi-même*, namely a proactive exercise of self-formation of the self by the self. Hence, the self constitutes a continuous rearrangement of its parts, which are forever changing in line with the historical and social reality. The relation to the self defines the ethical substance of the subject (wherefore ontological primacy is granted to the self), while the realization of this relation is achieved by means of an ascetic lifestyle, that is a type of training pertinent to a free individual's decision to lead a life of self-sovereignty. Sovereignty over the very self is the key to understanding the composition of the moral subject in the ancient world. It is an introduction to a specific manner of subjectivization, aiming clearly at a teleology which directs individual action towards lifestyles that are on a par with the finest part of the self. *Αυτόν εαυτόν ἄρχειν* translates into sovereignty over the individual passions and pleasures, which entails a calibre of self-reflective ethics: virtuous is the subject that has established a relation of "sovereignty-obedience" with the self and, therefore, there could be a theorization of a "self-sovereign" structure of the subject in the moral practice of daily life. In short, a soul-wise dismembered existence shall not prosper, for it lacks that structure of power, that is to say of authority, which allows it to rule over the weaker powers of its self. By the same token, a hedonistic subject, an *ἥττων ἐαυτοῦ* subject, cannot assert the authenticity of its existence; unfree and captive to its desires, it relinquishes the critical inner kernel that will allow it to cast its eyes inwards. The unguided self is deprived of that necessary freedom formed within the frame of self-imposition, which allows the subject to connect and behave in accordance with the truth of its nature.

In the ancients' thought, the lack of prudence, restraint, and moderation disturbs the confrontation with the truth of the self due to the prevalence of anarchy in a soul fragmented by indulgence to pleasures and desires. Access to the authenticity of existence pertains to neither a strict theory of ethical rules nor to compliance with a rigid system of social-behavior norms. It primarily pertains to those forms of self-discipline of the subject that leads to the aestheticization of its existence. For, above all else, it is a matter of personal discernment and choice to guide one's existence by pledging one's self to the freedom of individuality and self-creation. A deeper ethical pluralism allows the humans of the ancient greek antiquity to endorse the rules they had decided to lead their life upon, yet without undermining the social dimensions of their choice. Besides, precisely by reason of this social dimension of their choice, they were capable of enacting a metamorphosis upon the self through the interaction with one another. Ultimately, the individual and social dimensions of a *βασιλεύοντος εαυτού* subject assume political significance: Since the telos of the Aristotelian polity is a comprehensive and autarkic life, and since this form of life is equal to living *εὐδαιμόνως καὶ καλῶς*, it is reasonable that only free and equal citizens, each of whom cares for the common good, are capable of accomplishing this endeavor. Therefore, only citizens who exercise self-authority are capable of realizing the postulate of common prosperity.

Several scholars saw Foucault's interpretation of self-sovereignty critically. Some have noted that the French thinker regresses to a pre-Kantian and pre-enlightenment way of thinking, which is inapt to give sufficient grounds for justice and, thus, add a social dimension to the postulate of authentic existence. Others have held that a form of aesthetic dadaism prevents Foucault from orienting the discussion towards a normative approach to the ways one is to practice self-care under modern social circumstances and conditions. Simply put, nothing stops the modern subject, which is preoccupied only with its self, from acting unethically in all other respects, or indifferently to its relationships with the others. In this regard, the danger of a form of ethical relativism looms ante portas. Besides, the overemphasis on a self-sovereign care of the self is not a method of proof of what one ought to do, for there is neither a single way of living well, nor a unique stimulus to convince one to act that way. No one, eventually, feels the need to craft their life in accordance with an idealized and often unattainable work of art, and no one can be morally coerced into being good in their relationships with others.

I consider that all the aforementioned criticisms illuminate to a great extent the sociopolitical significance of a self-sovereign subject in the ancient greek world. Indeed, to the ancients, in its highest level of humaneness, the human being is a social being, - not mechanically but, rather, towards ethico-intellectual ends - which seeks prosperity in both the self and the polis equitably. The aim of politics is to enable the citizens to act prudently. Given that the ancient world is not characterized by a sense of constant tension between the individual and the state or, say, social imposition, the issue at stake is its rigorous and direct involvement in the public affairs as a citizen: the normative establishment of a fair polity is inescapably related to the notion of the citizen as a fair man, without whom political justice cannot be realized. Therefore, the philosophical ethos of Foucault is summarized in the bilateral way in which the free subject perceives the practices of self-care as related to both its self and the wider world: Authentic and, in this sense, consciously self-sovereign beings are those who can presuppose their political involvement on a basis of free and equitable citizenship. Here, I shall reinforce the common etymological root of the words *αὐθεντίας*, namely the absolute ruler of the self, and *αὐθεντικότητα*; in its broader and elusive rendering, it means to be true to one's self. In the ancient world, one is their self because they can rule over the insentient elements of their self. Of course, this is impossible to happen at all times and to everyone. For this reason, in a hierarchically structured world, like the one of the antiquity, the discussion pertains and is relevant to the educated, and cultivated citizen, who is requested to connect with the polis intellectually. The postulate of self-sovereignty, by dint of integration of an authentic being, partakes in a systematic perspective of a *καλῶς ἀρχειν καὶ ἀρχεσθαι*, for it is the citizen only to be called on to rule the polis on political terms. As a consequence, the postulate of an authentic being as a requirement for self-sovereignty, which permeates an entire aesthetics of **existence**, remains abeyant in the case of women, for example, or the metics, the slaves and all those who are denied political involvement. The origin and social status play the prime role in the realization of freedom practices and activate the postulate of a comprehensive and autarkic life (*κοινωνία ζωῆς τελείας καὶ αὐτάρκους*). In other words, authentic life is only the autarkic life, and this form of life *only* is equal to living *εὐδαιμόνως καὶ καλῶς*. The ancient man seeks to be authentic because he ought to discover his self, his secrets, and his hidden truth in order to become a political protagonist by, primarily, winning over his worst self and, eventually, creating homologous political relationships of equality and freedom within the polis.

2. The mirthless reception of the authentic self in the modern discourse.

In modernity, the postulate for authenticity was, initially, not accompanied by normative conditions for a hands-on realization. Kant introduces a monumental ethical turnover in which, although the concept of freedom is related to the autonomy of a will capable of complying with a logical form of rules set by the individual, this ethics remains an inner-worldly matter, which is not necessarily in harmony with the ancient greek tradition of political justice.

In Kant, the postulate of autonomy establishes the basis for the integrity of human or any other being reasoned nature. The absolute and categorical Kantian dictate requires an absolute point of reference; and such an absolute value or end in itself is the human or any other reasoned being. The Kantian endeavor of universalization of human dignity attempted to rupture a long-lived traditional belief that related dignity to the morality of honor of those who belonged to certain social classes of prominence. In this long-lived use and version, the realization of an authentic self remained a restricted postulate for those who had the right to enjoy their *dignitas*, meaning predominantly those groups who were public officials or enjoyed professional prestige and wider social acceptance. Hence, the idea of authenticity should be seen as a corollary of the predating idea of human dignity and its socio-historical connotations, which principally revealed its social partiality in essence: not everyone could claim equity in their inner connection with their inalienable and authentic self without their prior, status-based involvement in public affairs. It is worth noting that the concept of *dignitas*, as a constituent of the commune based on merit or social offer, was not ruptured by the proponents of natural law either. Even in the setting of the most radical claims for equity based on natural law (i.e. in the case of the English civil war), its invocation remained rather marginalized. This is explicable to the extent that time and age was far from the era of political democratization by means of a universal right of participation in elections.

The Kantian linkage of the autonomous subject to the universality of human dignity, and the expansion of the idea of human rights is, of course, decisive in the contemporary perception of the authentic subject. However, while it cuts across the moral concern over an autonomous subject, it does not automatically solve the problem of the Aristotelian *αἰρετώτατος βίος*. This happens because the foundation of an autonomous subject law-wise is one thing, and the flourishing of a prosperous citizen in terms of individual self-development and fulfillment another. It should be noted that the extortive replacement of a long-standing natural inequality with a contract-bound society gave rise to a human being perceived as an individual, who is no longer existentially defined by their active participation in the political affairs. The new, historicized version of authenticity highlights the unprecedented potential of self-invention, yet comes with the significant detriment of an inevitable loss: Henceforth, the authentic self ought to resign from the aim of prosperity at a more collective level than that of the self. The radical individualization of life occurs upon the void of a polis that ceases to be animated by a need for precedent feelings of friendship. Hereafter emerges the major question of possibility of constitution of an authentic and prosperous self amidst the circumstance of a widely fragmented and, thus, non-autarkic polis. Politically speaking, the emergence of the modern state, with its monopoly of legal violence, remoulds the discussion on authenticity. Gradually, it is becoming abridged and in search for a re-contextualization within the private realm of each individual's household. The postulate of an authentic life effaces a big part of its political capital, as it is becoming increasingly individualist, veering away from the desire for an autarkic and friendship-driven solidary polis.

The inaugural modern discourse on authenticity launched by Rousseau posits in the most exemplar of ways the interface between the authentic self and the unauthentic relationships born in its social environment. His vehement criticism against the theatricalization of social life as well as the predeceasing, unequal, and hierarchical social relations escalates through an acute gravitation towards withdrawal, which stems from the disappointment and distress caused by social relations. Spontaneity and honesty do no longer suffice for a connection of the subject with the inner voice of its conscience. What is now at stake is to achieve unity and coherence of the self through the abolition of the unequal and exploitative social relations, which produce distress and social alienation. A guarantee of authenticity is now the inalienable, in-person appearance of the citizen in the general assembly, that is to say the place of sovereignty and decision-making. In the community of the Social Contract, authenticity manifests itself in a form of identity with the communal ethos and the common good. However, the issue is still at stake. In the public assembly of a community based on the Social Contract, there is no development of public liaison, since the participation of the citizens is confined to "a mere voting right", while the legislative initiative belongs to the government exclusively. As to the remainder, freedom takes place in a uniform, hence anti-pluralistic, framework of extortive relations of identity among citizens. Therefore, there is no room for protestations that oppose to the ethics and the common interest of the community. The modern discourse on authenticity through Rousseau inscribes a negative sign to the discussion right from the start: The offense against the authentic self by the external environment becomes eventually the leitmotiv of the discourse.

A series of emblematic philosophical examples confirms the contemplative roving of the self in the alienative world of the utilitarian usage of Rational Thinking. We shall remember the Hegelian diagnosis of "unhappy consciousness", which quests at the outside of itself, in a transcendence afar, what is possible to find only within it. The marxist intervention is equally important, since it explains how the human beings in the capitalist relations emerge as alienated from their products and are, thus, incapable of retrieving their powers and satisfy their basic needs. In his early work, Marx uses two similar terms, namely *alienation* (Entäusserung) and *estrangement* (Entfremdung), to explain that alienation is not present in the product of capitalist labour alone, but in its very process as well.

By estranging the self from its active functions, alienating labour diverts humans from their kind. *Conscience malheureuse* is the outcome of the event that in the world of their estranged products humans feel futile themselves, for they have been estranged from their “substance”. Thus, we learn from Marx for the first time that the inauthentic human is the alienated human of the capitalist exploitation, like the one we encounter in the harsh reality of capitalist relations. During the 20th century as well, there nests the conviction of an inauthentic existence inside a mass society. The existentialism of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger intuits the difficulty of establishing the authentic self inside the existing social systems and the consequent self-estrangement as the “ontological” essence of *Dasein*. The pervasive atmosphere of destruction prevalent in the aftermath of the first World War moulded Heidegger’s pompous philosophical lexicon. This lexicon was brimful of terms such as “concern”, “care”, and “being-towards-death”. As a matter of course, the calamities of war instilled a feeling of human decline which was transferred to the philosophical discourse on authenticity: Concern turns into an integral part of existence in form of insecurity, fear, and symptoms of weakness. Authenticity appears as unpleasant and unbearable because of the existential concern. The subject is forced to resort to unauthentic forms of life, which afford the illusion and fleeting certainty of its value. Further on, Sartre’s existentialism raised the issue of the alienated individual as shaped by the modern division of labour and the exploitation of the workers. Well-known is his aphorism that one can be no saint when working sixteen hours a day. In this case, it is fully understandable why, according to Sartre, hell is the other people: The human being ceases to be free and responsible for their choices, since their inauthentic life prevents the constitution of the self by the self as well as its revision and change. The negation of freedom is a form of “bad faith” towards the self, through which the human attempts to avoid stress engendered by the absence of a preceding essence, namely the “nothingness” of human existence.

Apart from philosophical existentialism, it was, of course, the cultural movements that instigated an unprecedented revolution in the way humans perceive themselves in the era of modernity. For example, the movement of romanticism attacked the rational thinking of Enlightenment, attaching great importance to values, like integrity, honesty, and devotion to a certain ideal, for which one can sacrifice their entire life. In its unbridled version, romanticism is overwhelmed by a mystical vitalism of a dark and unconscious will, which gradually reaches self-awareness. The ultimate maxim is no longer the *cogito ergo sum* but the *volo ergo sum*. The abaton of inner experience becomes the sanctum sanctorum of the authentic existence. Obsessive phenomena, like that of nostalgia for an undestroyed nature or of a torrential dispute against every form of order by means of accepting the inner heart’s invitation to homecoming, avail the romantic movement’s perennial impact on the interminable probe into an uncontrived, far-flung, and infinite self. The modern arts that developed early in the 20th century, such as expressionism, dadaism, and surrealism, should be regarded as the various revivals of the romantic maxim. That way or another, they reasserted the postulate of discovery of new sources of identity for the constitution of the authentic self.

3. Political and philosophical bids for normative grounds for authenticity.

This modern perception of the authentic self, who is called on to invent an identity under the conditions of a hostile social and political environment, could not have left political ideologies unaffected. The marxist vision of a messianic-like society is apparently committed to this end. The overcoming of scarcity through satisfaction of all material needs and the cooperative imperative in all public affairs give meaning to a “politics of return”, that is a form of reunification of humanity with its very self. The anarchist postulate for a stateless and classless society based on the capabilities of voluntary cooperation and mutual help among people in accordance with the individual self-definition is, similarly, oriented towards direction of more authentic forms of individual and social relations. Likewise, the political worldview of liberalism is also established, as a distinctive political move of the Enlightenment, upon the ethical principle of the free individual in an independent civil society with minimum state intervention. Also, in the liberal framework, the notion of authenticity is invested with the distinct significance of the ethically free choice with respect to the forms of life the individual wishes to opt for. Thus, in its most optimistic perspective, liberal individualism converges towards a self-defined freedom, which grants recognition to everyone so that they can realize the ends of their existence independently. However, all the aforementioned ideologies are, in reality, faced with the question of their application. They seek their terms of realization of prosperous life externally, while the question remains open as regards the lasting loss of connection between the subject and its inner self: The distance between every political ideology and the reality of social life is revealed through the inability to remove inequitable relations under the conditions of free market. The revival of the notion of authenticity after the second World War by means of the so-called policies of recognition and expansion of human rights does not solve the problem; rather, it simply transfers it under circumstances of mounting scarcity of goods and social resources. The universality of the notion of dignity did not manage to acquire the importance of a practically binding nature, and, as a result, the realization of the authentic self remains within the bounds of an enclosed space of action, which does not pertain to the entirety of the polis; instead, it is only pertinent to the private life of the citizen.

In late modernity, the relative success of the students', the feminists' or other minority movements that claimed their emancipation in the bounds of the rule of law of a democratic state reasserted the necessity of normative grounds for the philosophical discourse on authenticity. With the postmodern theorizations of "diversity" all hells broke loose regarding the recognition of the existence of every citizen's say in an environment of progressive individualization and extreme mass-democratic consumerism, which require a moment of recognition of the other's existence. Ferrara distinguishes between an integrative and a decentralizing authenticity, and advocates for an intersubjective and reflective interpretation, which would aid a better understanding of matters of justice, ethics, and political philosophy. Larmore's critique on this position perceives the notion of authenticity as one value among others, that is, in contrast to Ferrara, he relativizes the postulate of a normative power of authenticity, and highlights pointedly that often things go better when we our goals is not "to be ourselves alone".

Another criticism against Ferrara's position was launched by the German philosopher Alex Honneth, who tries to revive contemporary theory by reintroducing the Hegelian idea of recognition into the modern/contemporary politico-philosophical discourse. Honneth notes two renderings of the notion of Ferrara's authenticity, namely a hypostatic and a methodological: The hypostatic appeals to a generalization of the ethical element, whereas the methodological is aiming at a paradigm shift, which provides vital space to validity claims for diverse forms of life. Honneth believes that authenticity ought to become a more inclusive dogma method-wise, so that the truth of an individual will is not defined solely by our personal wants and wishes. Moreover, the generalization of the canon of self-realization could perhaps jeopardize the multicultural circumstances of contemporary democracies, for instance, when the majority culture could claim that public life is fully informed by its collective identity and, thus, deprive minority cultures of their capacity to express themselves publicly. Ferrara addressed these critiques by explaining that he accounts by all means for the references to the others, namely the intersubjective moment of recognition, while, contrary to Honneth's claim, he never advocated for a reconstruction of modern understanding of reflectiveness through the idea of authenticity.

Despite Ferrara's attempt to provide normative grounds for authenticity, the question remains open as to whether the distinction between authenticity and autonomy can become unambiguous. Perchance, this distinction may be methodologically unsound, and might as well be perceived as two forms of autonomy: on the one hand, as the quality and content of an ethical conscience and, on the other, as typical of an ethically mature citizen capable of defending the ethical referent of their stance, by exhibiting sound judgement and rational way of thinking. Unless this is the case, there emerges a series of perils rooted in the discourse on authenticity. Competitive forms of authenticity, such as the "untainted" appraisal of the self as forever opposed to the demands of society, or the invariable defense of the right to diversity, which can paralyze every shared norm or value, may not only enervate the democratic state, but even lead to radical destabilization of its functions. Habermas, perhaps, is right, when he claims that happiness, unlike justice or science, relates to the unique constellations of the already-lived practices as well as the moral orientations and traditions; its subject matter is always a historically unique modulation. Therefore, it is exceptionally difficult to procure a universally binding way of expounding the individual perceptions of "happy life". Habermas reaches the kernel of the basic philosophical problem of authenticity bitterly. Since the contemporary political life does not aim at taking responsibility for the personal happiness of each individual, the authentic self is left to flourish by dint of the individual capacities of each citizen. The seizure of individual responsibility becomes the new analogical measure of happiness, which will eventually define the relative living condition.

4. Final Comments

In the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, authentic life is pursued through those forms of life that fulfill the sovereignty of the best parts of the self. The victory over the lesser part of self is predominantly political, as it is automatically transferred to the collective through the direct involvement of the citizen in the public affairs. The ontological primacy of the prudent self does not entail an early individualism of possessive nature, since, as I explained, the teleology of a self-sovereign subject is political, that is it is aiming at a sufficient cluster of fair citizens, who will regulate the interaction according to the criteria for an autarkic polis. The discussion is necessarily intertwined with the postulate of happy life, for happy may be only whoever rules consistently over the illogical elements of their self. In short, I would say that, in the ancient world, the postulate of authentic is enshrined in the terms of a happy life as a result of the sovereignty of the better self over the lesser.

A rendering of authenticity as such ceases to exist under the conditions of modernity. The notions becomes noticeably apolitical, given that what is at stake is no longer the proactive involvement of the citizen in public affairs, beyond the participation in elections through voting. Consequently, the ancient-Greek postulate of the reigning self loses its major political significance in modernity, and is left to be addressed within the private life of each citizen.

The progressive individualization is a socio-historical incident which is absent in the ancient world, while, in the modern one it introduces an unprecedented leeway of emancipatory capabilities, yet without precluding the emergence of isolated and lone existences. Inversely, the fragmentation of the social sphere and the absence of collective meaning becomes highly perceptible in the latest philosophical discourse: The discourse on authenticity is gradually being detached from both an individual and collective happy life. Authenticity, as a philosophical idea of modernity, acquires new and to-date unilluminated facets, which does not exclude it from introduction to conflicts over the personal degeneration through the relation to the self and the social environment. Confined in the fate of its privacy, existence is forced to pose all the question from scratch, without any chance of stepping upon the ancient-greek tradition of moderation and self-care. In modernity, authenticity is essentially governed by a version of a solitary self that is uncertain to be always capable of having a clear answer to the question of whether there is or not meaning in life.