

[Essay]

Ethical Selves

A Sketch for a Theory of Relational Authenticity

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Abstract

Philosophers who show interest in authenticity tend to narrowly focus on its capacity to help people evade conformity and affirm individuality, a simplistic reduction that neglects authenticity's moral potential and gives credence to the many critics who dismiss it as a euphemism for excessive individualism. Yet when conceived relationally, authenticity can also allow for worthy human flourishing without falling prey to conformity's opposite extreme — egoism. This essay proposes a sketch for a relational conception of authenticity that can help prevent the often-destructive excess of egoism while also offsetting the undesirable deficiency of heteronomy, concertedly moving agents towards socially responsible living.

1. Introduction

Can we be ethically authentic? Philosophers who have shown interest in authenticity have focused quite narrowly on its capacity to help us evade conformity and affirm individuality, a simplistic reduction that cheapens authenticity's moral potential and gives credence to the many critics who dismiss it as a euphemism for excessive individualism. If authenticity is only about heeding an inner voice, the notion of social engagement as a path to meaningful self-definition seems incoherent, even absurd. The question becomes: How can authenticity allow for worthy human flourishing without falling prey to conformity's opposite extreme — egoism?

In this essay, I wish to propose a sketch for a theory of relational authenticity¹ as the ideal intermediate between the excess of egoism and the deficiency of heteronomy, drawing loosely on Aristotle's "golden mean"

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¹ By relational, I mean authenticity that recognizes the interpersonal relationships and worldly engagements that imbue meaning into agents' lives.

approach. Morally worthwhile authenticity is threatened when one of its defining attributes — individualism — becomes overinflated and leads to an excessive extreme: egoism. To prevent this excess, while also evading the undesirable deficiency of heteronomy, the concept of relational authenticity offers a happy medium where connections to others matter to flourishing. People lead authentically moral lives when they reflect their individuality in their actions while also recognizing their potential and their limitations as agents existing in a relational context. Aware that their social relationships and interactions help define their identities, relationally authentic people create life projects that simultaneously support their individuality while complementing, if not supporting, others' flourishing projects. I will begin by summarizing egoism as a threat to the authentic ideal, drawing on the ideas of Charles Taylor, then explore the relationally authentic self, its possible features and its degree of achievability.

2. Egoism: A Threat to the Authentic Ideal

Part of authenticity's limitations is its inherent element of vagueness: authentic living cannot be reduced to a set of prescribed actions or norms since such a prescription would imply conformity and thus inauthenticity. Left without proper concretizing, authenticity has been wrongly interpreted by some to be tantamount to indulging a “nonmoral desire to do what one wants without interference,”² as cautioned by Charles Taylor in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, resulting in a distressing prevalence of egoistic mindsets that popularize the prioritization of self-interest as a rational, even moral guiding principle. In colloquial terms, authenticity and egoism have become almost inseparable: to be authentic is to think that your way is the only way, that you are a self-made creature, that you can and should decide the outcome of your life without external restriction.

Egoism, as an excess of individualism, threatens authentic living by disconnecting individuals from their social and relational context, encouraging them to see others as mere pawns in their life projects or to justify self-interest even at the cost of others' well-being. Perhaps the most well known proponent of a strong view of egoism is Ayn Rand, who argues in her book *The Virtue of*

² Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991): p. 21.

Selfishness that individuals must always be the beneficiaries of their rational self-interest. In her estimation, the individual has lost moral significance because contemporary societies have been misled by the sacrificial ethics of a Judaic-Christian heritage that makes individuals slaves to others' demands. Instead, an individual's ethics should be self-referential with no regard for the other, since "everything he needs or desires has to be learned, discovered and produced by him — by his own choice, by his own effort, by his own mind."³

This Randian alternative — the "self-sufficient ego" — is portrayed with unsettling precision in her novel *The Fountainhead*, the story of Howard Roark. For Rand, Roark is a true individualist who perseveres in spite of constant opposition, adversity and criticism, gaining a few loyal devotees in the process though never seeking their support outright, as he needs no external assistance to survive and thrive. In a pivotal monologue, Roark states, "No man can live for another. He cannot share his spirit just as he cannot share his body."⁴

Yet as Taylor warns, individuals who obsessively pursue their own plans and projects are more likely to become moral relativists, losing any sense of responsibility or higher meaning. Taylor laments the rise of what he dubs the principle of "self-choice," which states that individuals ought to respect each other's choice of values simply because they chose them, not because they necessarily reflect some set of worthwhile criteria. As a result of this tendency, the personal autonomy required for authentic living has been reduced to an atomistic kind of self-determination that objectifies others and makes demands on the very society it dismisses as overly intrusive. Put another way, this extreme egoism suggests that individuals are only truly self-governing if they dedicate themselves exclusively to the promotion of their personal welfare and if they trust (with considerable presumption) that the results of their individualistic efforts will improve humanity as a whole, even saving it from its pathetic empathetic and charitable gravitations. In Taylor's words, "the dark side of individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society."⁵

3. The relationally authentic self

³ Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, (New York: Signet, 1964): p. 23.

⁴ Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Penguin, 1994): p. 711-714.

⁵ Taylor, 1991, p. 4.

Though relational authenticity should never endorse an excess of egoism, it should no more advocate a path towards selflessness. With no clear sense of self, we are far more likely to become inauthentic as we have not dedicated the time required to discover and nurture our values, capacities and aspirations. Further, empathy, a vital criterion of relational authenticity, cannot exist without a firm sense of self. To empathize is to be capable of relating to the plight of another, to commiserate, to imagine our *self* in their context. Cultivation of the self is thus crucial to the authentic ideal though it is not equivalent to the disconnected pursuit of personal interests. So how can we achieve a self that is neither effacing nor aggrandizing?

Though absolute altruism is misguided, egoism is equally unhelpful — to believe in a “self-sufficient ego” is to deceive ourselves into thinking our sense of self alone can provide everything we need for a meaningful life. Yet we need others, not in the way Rand describes, not in terms of approval or awe — representing either questionable neediness or self-absorbed promotion — but simply to give our self-conception and ensuing actions depth and substance.

In a typical human life, there are phases of vulnerability when that need is more literal — infancy, illness, old age — and other phases when that need is more figurative, when others provide a backdrop against which we come to understand what matters to us and aspire to act accordingly. Taylor calls this backdrop our “pre-existing horizons of significance,” or the sources of meaning that have culminated from centuries of human evolution and diverse contributions from past civilizations. Authenticity encourages a self-creation that recognizes this rich context and helps foster a relational identity that is embedded in and embellished by it. The result is a kind of commitment whose focus and purpose lies beyond the self:

I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. . . . Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.⁶

⁶ Taylor, 1991, p. 40-41.

Although egoists may claim that they act authentically when they do as they please, this argument is but “a rather thinly disguised appeal to self-indulgence,”⁷ as they fail to connect their self-creation to pre-existing horizons of significance. Though authenticity necessitates a certain amount of independence, it is not a solitary pursuit. As Taylor emphasizes, authentic identities are the product of our personally endorsed sources of significance as well as intimate dialogue with the cast of characters in our lives: “We define [our identity] always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognize in us. And even when we outgrow some of the latter — our parents, for instance — and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live.”⁸

Accordingly, the key to a relational take on individualism that avoids both its excesses and its deficiencies is the ability to determine and expand our aptitudes and aspirations, then “forget ourselves on purpose”⁹ whenever necessary by cultivating a strong awareness of our capacity to respond to external needs through the specific features of relational authenticity.

4. Features of Relational Authenticity

Relational authenticity is a moral attitude that strives to capture the genuine way that individual selves connect with the world around them — people, other living things, nature. It suggests that what is “true” about our selves and our lives does not stop at our personality traits but includes our manner of engaging with the world. Relationally authentic individuals may be independent in an important sense but they are never disconnected, constantly striving to identify what matters to them while contributing to a worldly context. Relational authenticity can thus successfully test whether agents are living for a purpose beyond their self-interested aims by guiding them away from lifestyles that prize excessive individualism and toward lifestyles that put them in touch with their moral responsibility. By adopting a relationally authentic attitude, people become capable of balancing their personal ambitions *and* their social

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 56.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁹ Al Gini, *Why It's Hard To Be Good* (New York: Routledge, 2008): p. 4.

obligations, thus enabling them to lead more consistently moral lifestyles. The following list of criteria is by no means exhaustive but it helps paint a picture of the relationally authentic person by highlighting psychological traits and environmental conditions that favour a healthy balance between individual and social considerations, and reflect the contributions of various theorists interested in authenticity's ethical potential. The list aims to attribute intelligible, somewhat precise features to relational authenticity to rescue it from the common criticism of providing a "cushion of ambiguity" through which to excuse immoral behaviour, without giving it the specific content that would contradict its very purpose of affirming each person's individuality.

Relationally authentic people are capable of self-reflection. Bernard Williams prizes self-reflective activities for the authentic expression they help achieve, capturing "the idea that some things are in some real sense really you, or express what you are, and others aren't."¹⁰ By reserving enough time in their lives for introspection, relationally authentic people rarely lose sight of their values and conscience in the flurry of everyday pressures. They have become capable, as Martin Heidegger would say, of *eigentlich* (the German for "authentic")¹¹ by owning up to what they are becoming. Though they consciously avoid getting overwhelmed by conformity-oriented outside pressures, if they consider existing customs or outlooks appropriate and meaningful, they can endorse these without being heteronomous since they are aware of how these particular norms align with their own values and identifications. Thus through reflection, relationally authentic people come to understand themselves in an honest, lucid way: to borrow from Charles Guignon in *On Being Authentic*, "Only if we candidly appraise ourselves and achieve genuine self-knowledge can we begin to realize our capacity for authentic existence."¹²

Relationally authentic people recognize the impact of human history. While their existences are theirs to create, they acknowledge, even celebrate, belonging to a rich history that influences their choices and gives these choices meaning. This history includes particular cultural pasts — both those that elicit pride and

¹⁰ Stuart Jeffries, "Bernard Williams: The Quest for Truth," *The Guardian* (30 Nov. 2002), p. 4.

¹¹ Charles Guignon, "Authenticity," *Philosophy Compass*, 2008, 3, (2).

¹² Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (New York: Routledge, 2004): p. 6.

shame — as well as the broader human evolution since prehistoric times. Johann Gottfried Herder touches on this kind of historical recognition in his thoughts about cultural inheritance: “Our noblest possessions do not come from ourselves; our understanding along with its powers, the way in which we think, act, and exist, is, as it were, inherited. . . . The passage of such contributions into the whole eternal treasure of humanity requires a rejection of our own ego, that is, a renunciation of self and of the prejudices that cling to the self.”¹³ From this historical awareness, relationally authentic people come to understand that they are not the origins of their full identities though they can originally express these identities. Michael Sandel describes this self-understanding as intersubjectivity:

Because I am partly constituted by the shared practices, traditions and ends of my community; because my individuality is a social product developed through interactions and relationships with others, participation in joint practices, and ‘a common vocabulary of discourse,’ then my identity is not an isolate but a conjunction, not a subjectivity but an intersubjectivity.¹⁴

Relationally authentic people are responsible for their choices and the resulting outcomes. This responsibility represents a recognition of personal freedom and, by extension, of others’ freedom. It also involves accepting that all the actions in our life repertoire — from the noblest to the most terrible — become part of the ongoing narrative of our identities. Alexander Nehamas dubs this stance as “a willingness to accept responsibility for everything that one has done, and to admit . . . that everything that one has done actually constitutes who one is.”¹⁵ The ensuing implication is that self-creation ought to be a responsible process. Especially successful relationally authentic people not only accept responsibility for their choices and resulting outcomes, but also take up roles in the world that reflect and ingrain this acceptance. Taylor describes this move as dualistic: “First, we are able to give a response to the question of where we stand in relation to shared concerns of our community. And second, we can be counted

¹³ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993): p. 59-61.

¹⁴ Jack Crittenden, *Beyond Individualism: Reconstituting the Liberal Self*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): p. 21.

¹⁵ Alexander Nehamas, “How to Become What One Is,” *The Philosophical Review*, 1983, 92: p. 411.

on by others to take part in confronting the issues facing our community.”¹⁶

Relationally authentic people foster personal integrity by avoiding self-deception. Relational authenticity requires people to strive for as much honesty as possible in their self-assessments and their actions. If they fall into self-deception and experience lapses of bad faith (which may happen in trying moments), they must avoid dwelling in these inauthentic states by forgiving themselves, rectifying their lapse and moving on. As such, their personal integrity does not result from perfectionism but from grace in the face of human error. For relationally authentic people, integrity also involves unity — as opposed to duplicity — in their sense of selfhood. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that this integrity arises simply from viewing others’ authentic identity-building as equally valid to our own and, consequently, refraining from undermining it through oppression or exploitation. Domination of any kind does not count as authentic, as Sartrean scholar T. Storm Heter writes:

In addition to having a lucid self-awareness and a disposition to accept one’s personal responsibilities, an existentially authentic person must have a basic disposition to respect and care about other people. Authenticity is, therefore, incompatible with behaviours like murder, torture and domination, which are all paradigm instances of disrespectful, dehumanizing treatment of others.¹⁷

Relationally authentic people strive to develop the discernment necessary to use rationality, emotion and intuition at the right times. While aware that there may be multiple ways of dealing with given circumstances, they attempt to establish the appropriate use of their faculties in order to remain faithful to their relational perspective. They do not, for instance, venerate rationality to the point of mechanizing human existence, nor do they strictly advocate emotion in moments of weakness that could spiral into dependence or addiction. They trust their intuition to guide them away from extremes of conformity or egoism, eliminating “toxic” ideas as if removing weeds from a healthy garden. Of course, the ability to judge well demands a great deal of concentration, which becomes

¹⁶ Guignon, 2004, p. 137.

¹⁷ T. Storm Heter, *Sartre’s Ethics of Engagement: Authenticity and Civic Virtue* (London: Continuum, 2006): p. 85.

difficult in an atmosphere of constant distractions. With enough focus, however, this discernment can effectively create links between life experiences to unveil when reason, emotion and intuition have their role to play. As a result, relationally authentic people are able to harmonize their life projects with the rest of the world, something that Eastern thinkers like Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, would certainly encourage: he uses the Tibetan term *shen-pen kyi-sem* to capture the idea of acting out one's concern for others by becoming helpful to them.¹⁸

Relationally authentic people have a sense of adventure. Adventure in this sense does not refer to exotic travels or daredevil antics but to a general openness to unfamiliarity and innovation. The authenticity muscle cannot flex if constantly confined to the routine and the predictable. By placing themselves in unusual, new or foreign situations, relationally authentic people draw on the capacities described above to help themselves adapt and grow. The experience strengthens their ability to cope with uncharted territory, meaning they will be more resilient and optimistic in moments of difficulty or adversity. When confronted with the world's problems and associated moral dangers, relationally authentic people feel strong enough to risk taking them on. Margaret Somerville characterizes this sense of adventure as “an openness to all ways of knowing, a comfort with uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox, and the courage to admit that one does not know and to change one's mind.”¹⁹ Additionally, this sense of adventure feeds the moral imagination of relationally authentic people, enabling what Al Gini calls “a dramatic virtual rehearsal that allows us to examine and appraise different courses of action in order to determine the morally best thing to do.”²⁰

Relationally authentic people feel empathy. Though the common tendency in evolutionary biology is to distinguish humans from other species by their capacity for rationality, current theories focus equally on the role of empathy in making higher primates worthy of the label “more evolved.” Frances Moore Lappé's analysis of mirror neurons in primates and humans illustrates how

¹⁸ Tenzin Gyatso, *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World: Ethics for the New Millennium* (London: Abacus, 2007): p. 23.

¹⁹ Margaret Somerville, *The Ethical Canary: Science, Society and the Human Spirit* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004): p. 15, p. 20.

²⁰ Gini, 2008, p. 38.

individuals can take part in another's experience simply by observing it, revealing the true power of empathy: "We do walk in another's shoes, whether we want to or not. . . . We therefore co-create one another, moment to moment. . . . Our actions, and perhaps our mental states, register in others, so that we change anyone observing us."²¹ Once again, Taylor's dialogical argument is helpful here: since relationally authentic people are aware of the impact of others in their self-creation, this recognition facilitates a profound sympathy. To borrow from Williams, "We need each other in order to be anybody."²² Yet this empathy does not stop at fellow human beings. Relationally authentic people strive to curtail anthropocentric viewpoints by recognizing that they are never wholly self-sufficient. They may exercise a great deal of autonomy in the human realm, but they are forever indebted to nature for satisfying their basic needs. This holistic perspective may translate into a spirit of conservation, not only in the form of ecological preservation but in the form of pacifism, opposing wars and military activity not only because of the violence, debt and anxiety they cause but also because of their destructive power over nature.

Relationally authentic people are determined and persevering. With a healthy dosage of humility, they can refrain from letting their ego interfere in their choices and actions, allowing them to learn from mistakes and press on. Eventually, this determination and perseverance result in self-mastery, which in turn contributes to their moral potential. They can adopt what Gini calls a "disengaged view from somewhere" as "dispassionate, reasonable [people] who [are] not wholly absorbed with the self."²³ In summary, relationally authentic people are reflective, discerning and determined individuals who foster a sense of integrity, historical awareness and adventure that bolsters their responsibility and empathy, all the while maintaining humility and perspective.

5. The Achievability of Relational Authenticity

Many theorists who are interested in authenticity remain dismissive of it

²¹ *YES Magazine*, Summer 2010, 54: p. 56.

²² Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002): p. 200.

²³ Gini, 2008, p. 39.

because they believe it is unattainable — no one can be expected to maintain an authentic stance at all times. Yet the relational conception presents an achievable kind of authenticity that recognizes the stresses and distractions of everyday life and, as such, allows individuals to err and fumble in their efforts to lead moral lives. By holding a relationally authentic attitude, individuals understand and accept they will inevitably sway towards the extremes of heteronomy or egoism during moments of weakness but if they generally balance their individual and social commitments, they will succeed in achieving a lifestyle that reflects their individuality *as well as* their concern for their worldly context. Though difficult, the relational perspective encourages people to confront the challenge because their goal is a morally praiseworthy flourishing that transcends immediate gratification. As Guignon writes:

Most people would agree, I think, that becoming and being authentic is an arduous process, and that authentic people are not necessarily the happiest people in the sense of having pleasurable feelings most of the time. The ideal of authenticity makes a very heavy demand on you, one that outweighs concerns about sustaining good feelings in all situations.²⁴

Indeed, the theorists surveyed would likely concur that the features that make relational authenticity demanding are exactly what make it so ethically significant.

As an achievable ethical conception, relational authenticity aims at improving ties among people — and between people and the natural world — while helping them become the best versions of themselves. As Owen Flanagan explains through his analogy to track and field, a tough but achievable moral conception pushes people to perform better and, ultimately, helps the whole community advance to a new level: “It may be that trying to meet impossible demands, or at least recognizing that such demands exist, helps agents to be better than they would otherwise be were they left without such goals.”²⁵

Some individuals may not be currently able to adopt a relationally authentic attitude, but a denial of their future possibility as relationally authentic people is not only demeaning, it is self-deceiving. Sartre astutely notes that

²⁴ Guignon, 2004, p. 148.

²⁵ Owen Flanagan, *Varieties of Moral Personality* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991): p. 29.

individuals who restrict their self-identity to certain currently relevant roles and characterizations vastly, and quite tragically, undermine their freedom to become something else, thereby divulging their inauthenticity. I too remain unconvinced that any existing traits are strong enough to completely overwhelm our potential to transcend them. As Flanagan puts it, “our natures are too plastic and our potentialities too vast for that.”²⁶

Even if scientific studies can claim with some degree of certainty that human nature is inherently egoistic — which they have yet to do even remotely — there is ample evidence that humans have the potential for non-egoistic behaviour. An ethical conception should cater to this potential so as to not undermine people’s human flourishing project. Gilbert Harman says it best:

Even though there are people who do not care enough about others . . . they ought to care, and there is something wrong with them that they do not care. If they do not care about others, they will not flourish. To be sure, they may have healthy, pleasurable lives, full of a rich sense of accomplishment, but flourishing involves more than that; it involves having a good character and acting rightly.²⁷

In order to promote human flourishing, relational authenticity places high but still reachable expectations on people to entice them away from egoism and heteronomy — its features are challenging while also being forgiving. Far from demanding altruism, relational authenticity focuses on the role of empathy in fortifying moral responsibility. As such, there exists an attainable balance between self- and other-oriented behaviour, one that acknowledges natural inclinations while promoting human possibilities. By encouraging us to treat other living things as valuable in their own right, relational authenticity colours our interactions with everything, proving that we can engage in our own self-cultivation without precluding caring: the world’s welfare can be part of our personal agendas.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 51.

²⁷ Gilbert Harman, “Human Flourishing, Ethics, and Liberty” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1983, 12 (4): p. 320.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I have strived to emphasize the moral potential of authenticity by presenting a sketch for a theory of relationally authentic selves that can balance personal aspirations and worldly concern. I have argued that people lead authentically moral lives when they reflect their individuality in their actions while also recognizing their potential and limitations as agents existing in a social context. By defining authenticity ethically through dialogical and community-oriented perspectives, I have asserted that a relationally authentic attitude can guide individuals away from egoism by putting them in touch with their responsibility and helping them recognize the interpersonal relationships and social engagements that imbue meaning into their lives. Despite distorted accounts of authenticity that wrongly promote excessive individualism, I believe that people value authentic attitudes because, on some level, they appreciate the relationally constructive dispositions, projects and commitments that genuine identity-building can help foster.

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