

Somogy Varga

Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal

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In the philosophical literature on authenticity, there are multiple solitudes. There are debates about and reinterpretations of the existentialists' notions of authenticity (O'Brien 2011; Anton 2001; Santoni 1995). There are historical-conceptual overviews of authenticity tracing it from ancient Greece through Romanticism to the twentieth century (Guignon 2004; Ferrara 1998; Golomb 1995). And there are vigorously analytic accounts that situate authenticity in debates about autonomy, determinism, and ethical responsibility, usually without naming authenticity as such (Korsgaard 1996; Frankfurt 1988). Somogy Varga's book *Authenticity as an Ethical Ideal* aims not only to survey, but to incorporate all of these perspectives into a novel account, as well as to argue for the role of authenticity within critical social theory. Moreover, Varga argues, somewhat problematically in my mind, that authenticity and capitalism have developed with reference to one another and need to be understood in tandem. The task of this short volume is highly ambitious, and its sources include everything from McDowell to Marx and Deepak Chopra. It is a dense read, offering details about an impressive array of thinkers, but not always charting a clear course through the cacophony.

Positive accounts of authenticity tend to stem from the Continental tradition and can be loosely grouped into two types: the essentialist or "inner sense" accounts (as Varga terms them) exemplified by Rousseau, and the existentialist or "productionist" accounts, whose primary exponents according to Varga are Nietzsche and Foucault. On the first type of view, there is some given fact about who I am, which is valuable *per se* and can be accessed through appropriate introspective channels. On the second type of view, who I am is nothing more than how I fashion myself; authenticity is the deliberate process of self-creation. The pitfalls of these accounts include "aestheticism and atomist self-indulgence," (5) as Charles Taylor (1991) most powerfully argued. Following Taylor, Varga seeks to resuscitate an account of personal authenticity based on agent-transcendent ethical demands, or "horizons of significance." He explains:

there is a double reference to evaluative ideas at the heart of authenticity. Besides non-distorted selfhood, authenticity also demands that the practice of such non-distorted selfhood is in accordance with certain structural features that characterize us as humans...with the realisation of ourselves, we simultaneously co-realize non-substantial anthropological aspects. (54-55)

For his account of "non-distorted selfhood" Varga turns to a third view about authenticity, deriving from recent analytic philosophy. Frankfurt's influential definition of "wholeheartedness" captures much of what authenticity is presumed to entail, without using this language explicitly. Higher-order desires must be aligned with first-order desires and coupled with an enduring commitment to the project they endorse. When one is wholehearted, "[t]here is no buffer zone between self, practical identity, and the project that one wholeheartedly cares about" (81). Varga argues that authenticity is wholeheartedness with a twist. "Authenticity is not

merely about wholehearted commitments, but also about embeddedness in the inter-subjectively constituted horizon of a larger community that ultimately is the source of the normative pull that our commitments have on us” (98). He deepens Taylor’s account by using social theorists such as Honneth and Habermas to add substance to the claim that our identity-defining commitments are in fact “intersubjectively constituted.” More boldly, he claims that “[w]holehearted caring involves a commitment to some public value that places a restriction on how I go about caring about my project” (102). With these modifications in hand, Varga elevates wholeheartedness to the “normative backbone of a critical social theory” (6).

One could quibble that this account invites a regress – why do we have these particular commitments and not others? Who is the self who chooses these commitments? – but this would be true of virtually all accounts of authenticity, which perpetually appeal to an ever deeper, “truer” self that gives rise to whichever self is explained by the account. (Varga acknowledges that his account “remains empty in the sense that it does not say anything about how we choose our commitments” [84].) He should also expect skepticism about the supposed correspondence between authentic projects and objective values. The strength of Varga’s account is its willingness to confront the blurry intersection between self and society, carving out a space for authenticity while accounting for external influences.

Varga’s self-described “‘post-analytic’ methodological approach” (9), which allows him to jump between thinkers from a variety of traditions, is aptly deployed to this effect. A Frankfurtian perspective substantiates the critique of Rousseau, for instance, by shedding light on the actual processes that may result in contacting an undistorted self (Rousseau merely refers to an “inner voice”). Meanwhile, Taylor’s account of the ethics of authenticity helps to ensure that the resulting self is not *de facto* hailed as the most virtuous simply because it is mine.

The method of examining various accounts of authenticity and extrapolating the stronger parts seems to falter when Varga arrives at the later existentialists. Heidegger’s account is given short shrift, while Sartre’s is taken somewhat out of context as a vehicle for discussing practical reason. Without much justification, Varga applies an arcane interpretation of “existential choices” as denoting the capacity, but not the will, to act otherwise. His recurring example is Luther faced with death or holding fast to his convictions. In contrast to Sartre’s example of the man choosing between joining the resistance and nursing his mother, Luther’s choice is characterized by necessity. Varga calls this an existential choice because “what Luther reports is that *as the person he (implicitly) understands himself to be...* he really had no options. The necessity or incapacities in question are simply expressive of the agent’s whole-hearted commitments” (111). This “choice” is therefore not existential in any recognizable way, much less authentic. For Sartre, seeing oneself as unfree is itself the mark of bad faith.

The upshot of this explanation is that Varga’s account logically rules out the possibility of inauthenticity in the sense of acting against our true selves. If Luther is genuinely wholehearted (authentic), then he cannot do otherwise. And if he can do otherwise, then he was not wholehearted to begin with, hence he would not be acting against himself either way. Instead, by doing otherwise, “Luther... re-frames the understanding of his life, in which the ‘failing’ of an existential choice is turned into a piece of self-knowledge that is integrated in a novel self-interpretation” (117). In moments like these, Varga channels Paul Ricoeur, who resists designations such as “authentic choices” in favour of fluid, narrative accounts of personal identity. Inauthenticity is explained only in passing: “the failing to go through with an existential

choice can be considered inauthentic, if it does not give rise to self-knowledge and re-employment” (118). A satisfying account of inauthenticity would require more exploration of this claim.

The book’s unique angle is the argument about authenticity in contemporary capitalist culture. Unlike recent volumes that expose authenticity as a myth about value, used to enhance the cachet of certain consumer goods and “lifestyles” (Potter 2010; Chidester 2005), Varga stays with questions of personal identity and shows how these, too, have been co-opted by capitalism. This section is compelling, but more parallel to than continuous with the rest of the main argument. Until this point, the argument had been a metaphysical-ethical account of authenticity that made a claim about what being an authentic person really means. The last chapter, which borrows heavily from sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), is an analysis of how authenticity has been re-defined in the public imagination to further the logic of capitalism. Here we are given three new models of authenticity, which do not graft perfectly onto the earlier, “philosophical” ones; these are now divested of their metaphysical contexts and identified as moments in the development of modernity. It is the “performative” model – a kind of mash-up of inner sense and productionism – that provides the most grist for Varga’s analysis of the interplay between capitalism and authenticity. In recent management and business literature,

authenticity is no longer conceived in a solipsistic manner... as in the case of the ‘inner sense’ model... Instead, it denotes an ‘energy’ that can be developed in strategic interaction with others. It is the *energy of difference*...this proto-uniqueness or proto-difference must – like capital – be invested in a situation, and only by performing uniqueness in a given situation with others can one be considered authentic. (134)

Varga’s main point, which is certainly valid, is that capitalism adroitly appropriates or “endogenizes” the criticisms against it to continually renew itself in a more palatable form (142). Authenticity began in modernity as a resource for critiquing society (see Rousseau) but has gradually been re-fashioned into a virtue of society itself, dragging the student protestors and artistic hold-outs along with it in a kind of Hegelian maneuver. This outcome, Varga implies, is ironic as well as undesirable.

The point is pushed a bit far when Varga contends that the new corporate demand for authenticity, because of its inherent paradoxicality (serving capitalist interests while purporting to serve individuals’ interests), results in a pathological “exhaustion of the self” (149) and even helps to explain the epidemic rise in depression and prescription anti-depressants. He appeals to a trend in evolutionary psychology that explains pathologies as adaptive responses to social stressors, rather than defective internal mechanisms, concluding: “there is a connection between the rise of [the performative] model of authenticity and the growth of depression” (157).

It is unclear whether Varga sees this final move as the vindication of his previous ones, namely using the positive account of authenticity articulated in earlier chapters to leverage a social theory, or as he puts it, to “diagnose... the pathologies of our culture” (37). For the only “pathology” that he identifies in the end is our self-destructive pursuit of authenticity itself. Not *his* authenticity, of course, but a distortion of authenticity. The meta-argument thus feels vaguely circular.

Ultimately what this book delivers is not one, but two accounts of authenticity. The first is an account in the philosophical sense – it argues for the correct interpretation of a concept. As such, it transcends political or cultural contingencies, being a “practice of autonomy” (6), and “therefore decisively formal” (84). The second is an account in the sociological sense – it argues that the popular development of a concept has been bound up with particular iterations of capitalist ideology. But this insight comes to light independently of the notion of wholeheartedness that grounded the first account. These contributions could be more effective if the relationship between them were clarified.

In the first chapter Varga claims that “the significant shortcoming that all accounts share and which makes them less attractive... [is] the lack of attention to the reciprocal shaping of capitalism and the ideal of authenticity” (32-33). This attention is not what makes his own philosophical account attractive, however. Varga provides a rendition of the undistorted self that transcends some of the solitudes in earlier literature. The blending of this account with an interdisciplinary social theory, however, points to the limits of such post-analytic transcendence.

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