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**Existential Authenticity and the Challenges of
the Postmodern Society**

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Existential Authenticity and the Challenges of the Postmodern Society

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Abstract

Authenticity is a guiding concept in existentialism, as it provides the basis of a proper understanding of peculiar existentialist themes and notions such as anxiety, individuality, otherness, freedom, selfhood, self-consciousness or responsibility. Basically, authenticity regards our own most inner self, our sheer individuality. However, authenticity is not a natural given, but a challenge for the individual to embark on a journey towards becoming a true self. What does it mean to have true self? When introducing his central concept of the Individual, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard necessarily opposes it to the abstract and empty notions of the masses. According to Kierkegaard, this kind of groups is formed by mere numerical members who don't take individual responsibility for their deeds. In his view, the public or the crowd only create social pressure through leveling, a dominant phenomenon of modern times. Starting from Kierkegaard's fundamental distinction, we will discuss the fate of the postmodern concept of authenticity that has been slowly stripped off its initial meanings in the philosophical discourse, one that, on the surface, still resembles its existentialist meanings, but the contents were adjusted to accommodate a sort of free-floating, versatile, opportunistic view of the human being, one that means whatever the speaker wants it to mean, and promises to be radically liberating. This "new kind" of authenticity implies, among other meanings, the requisite of reaching a different, superior version of the self, following the assumption that people are born and grow into a sort of imperfect, flawed, inferior, rigid state, that they need to transcend. The pressure to restore or discover an ideal of authenticity that is just a placeholder can be easily transformed into an ideological device, a political instrument. In this respect, we draw on views that treat authenticity as central to understanding various populist movements of our times as well. We believe that what might operate as an antidote to the empty contemporary popular understanding of authenticity is to link it to the ideal of a good life, one that comes with the idea of responsabilization and continuous questioning of one's current commitments.

Keywords: *authenticity, existentialism, individual, Kierkegaard, masses*

(Motto) “You can be anything you want to be
Just turn yourself into anything you think that you could ever be
Be free with your tempo be free be free
Surrender your ego be free be free to yourself” (Queen, Innuendo)

Introduction

It’s difficult to start a conversation about authenticity and connected concepts, such as truthfulness, veracity and fakeness, without taking into account the contemporary spread of antiscientific discourse, the “post-truth” discourse or anti-establishment movements, and last but not least, the muddy waters of the culture wars, over the disputed notions of tolerance of the intolerant, free speech, or cancel culture. The rise of populism has been heavily infused of an authenticity rhetoric, applied to a certain type of citizen that is qualified to have a voice and political power in the new postmodern world, under alleged attack from the forces of globalization and multiculturalism. While far-right populists seized and used this empty, free-floating concept of authenticity that refers to a class of people coming from a “deep”, “true”, “authentic” part of a country, that represents its soul or true core and it is the only one capable of defending and promoting its values, without shame or fear of the antagonizing forces of the open society defendants, there is a growing support of this agenda coming from traditionally more progressive circles. If conservatives are talking about a true people, among the left and liberals, there has been an independent development of ideas promoted by well-being and spiritual influencers, who are searching for true spiritual practices and genuine self-care outlets. We will talk about these two parallel conceptions throughout this paper, attempting to bring back Kierkegaard as a voice that might restore authenticity to a respected and trustworthy benchmark.

In 2020, a very popular Youtuber Jenna Marbles decided to end her online presence, after deciding the pressures of her critiques were too strong for her to continue with her work. Soon after, another YouTube channel was tragically announcing the Death of Authenticity, describing the “woke” witch hunts as a gateway to silencing everyone and preventing them to express their innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires online. In the light of this particular notion of authenticity developed inside the social media circles, the influencer is expected to display the process of his becoming, by making accessible to the larger public the old and the new ideas, controversial or not, that have preceded the current moment. What has to be noted is the fact that while pleading for maintaining an intact record of all the performances of an influencer, even when they circulate questionable ideas, not only promotes the belief that this is the only way to understand the transformation, the process of authentic development of a person, but also opens the door to putting forth unpopular ideas. In this light, everything becomes acceptable, because it is part of a journey of self-edification and understanding a person’s authenticity cannot be understood without embracing all facets of its personality, either dark or praiseworthy.

In this particular context, it is difficult to separate any discussion on the concept of authenticity from the fact that authenticity itself has become a commodity, a fabricated and monetized product that influencers strive to create, embody and convey, in order to make their presence popular. In this paper we will discuss a concept of authenticity that has slowly been stripped by its initial meanings in the philosophical discourse, one that in some ways still resembles its existentialist meanings, but these meanings were transformed in a flexible, opportunistic and radically liberating view of the human being that means whatever the speaker wants it to mean. This malleable and customizable view that has been promoted by pop culture, has become one of the tropes of self-help and spiritual gurus, then in the later years became commodified to attract followership and even transformed into a political instrument. As a political instrument, authenticity is central to understanding populist movements, leaders, and their spread across political systems all over the world, namely among most of the established western democracies in the age of disillusionment, but mostly in countries that haven't come to terms with their past. After analyzing all the ways in which authenticity has lost its "true core", we will try to reclaim it, going back to one of the voices that first made it popular in the philosophical world, and can bring some optimism in the attempt of putting it to the use of virtuous self-development, as an ethical ideal. Discarding all the corrupt meanings attacking the term, coming from social-media, advertising and marketing, management and entrepreneurship, politics or self-help, that have put authenticity under trial, we must first begin of an understanding and dismantling of these meanings.

Kierkegaard's concept of authenticity is developed on the interface between the individual and the crowd. The notion of the mass-man refuses the idea of achieving true authenticity, while giving in to external pressures of society or passively absorbing the values, roles and virtues imposed by society and its push for conformism.¹ While Kierkegaard looks for a view of the true self as one that needs to be decontaminated by the societal pressures, Heidegger² and Sartre³ develop accounts of authenticity in which the individual has to constantly balance the personal will and collective responsibilities and expectations. Charles Taylor talked about the ethos of authenticity in a culture that has been more and more concerned with narcissistic self-absorption. Social media added to the concerns expressed by Taylor, by amplifying and complicating the search for authenticity. As a result of enslaving people to vanity metrics, measuring the contents people expose and present about themselves, people have slowly been allured by and became slaves of a commodified version of authenticity. Or better said, of several versions of authenticity, applied to self, relationships, spirituality, leadership and society in general, namely politics. Authenticity has become a commodity that can be accessed via several mechanisms. Applied to the self or the other, there are two main accounts or directions of this search for authenticity, that are not orthogonal but feed into each other and sometimes compensate for each other. Both imply

¹This view has a later connection in Ortega Y (1932/1960) Gasset's mass man.

²See Sartre, J. P. 1948. *Anti-Semite and Jew*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

³See Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and time*. New York, NY: Harper Row.

a certain degree of performativeness and imply the idea of reaching a new/different/superior state of self. The implicit assumption is that people are born and grow into a sort of imperfect flawed, inferior, rigid state, that they need to transcend. Restoring or discovering authenticity as a quality of the self through “authentic growth” can be transformed into an ideological device when either it’s designed to hijack all personal resources in this endeavor, when it is deployed to attack the mechanisms of social solidarity, or when it is distorted enough to make certain political behaviors and attitudes acceptable.

Two Versions of Postmodern Authenticity

Focusing on the notion’s meanings as an intrapersonal tool that serves self-discovery, self-growth, and improvement, authenticity is “sold” in different formulas. One assumption for instance sells the idea that there is a true, deep version of the self that needs to be uncovered (unearthed, unfolded). Reaching this true self might imply a process best understood as mask-shedding. Masks are social tools that were purportedly created and worn to hide flaws, vices, imperfections or other perceived inadequacies, traditionally deemed as socially undesirable. The ideal, for both individuals and public personas (politicians) then becomes a ritual of displaying a raw, unpolished, “unedited”, vulnerable version of the self. This ideal, authentic self is a truth to be uncovered, a reality that needs to be accessed behind the veils imposed by appearance. The authentic, genuine, true self is static, and can only take one version, as it represents what is hidden behind the layers of years of sustained self-deception. Achieving it aims for realness, not necessarily consistency or congruence with the past self. Actually, in this meaning, the self has the possibility to reform itself at any moment, because redemption can happen at any moment. The idea behind this version of authenticity is that human flaws and shortcomings are fundamentally human, and the act of performing cosmetic operations aimed at hiding them is a sign of the intention to use deception, a symptom of a much deeper corruptness and unreliability. In this view, the transparent villain is seen as a lesser evil in comparison to the “polished”, educated, measured and composed one. Even if both are suspected of hypocrisy, the first one is less dangerous just because that it signals a form of “authentic”.

The alternative empirical assumption that resides more on an interpersonal account about the authentic self is dominated by an individual project that aims to seek, explore and ultimately grow or discover a new version of the self that is “free” and genuine, liberated by constraints imposed by the society or other groups where the individual is situated (family, peers, coworkers). This view has been pushed by the humanistic and positive psychology movements that insisted on a view of psychopathology as arising from a discrepancy between the subjective experiences and external behaviors. Self-determination theory posits that an authentic individual is capable to make self-determined and authentic choices, a trait that enables the achievement of optimal well-being. In this frame, central to authenticity is the idea of autonomy, or acting in accordance

to one's own desires, values and interests.⁴ The individual has access to these aspects that define his wants and in the same time, chooses to act in a manner that is aligned to them. Individual autonomy is essential and it is in antinomy to acting to please others or merely fulfill certain societal norms and expectations. Essential to self-determination theory is the idea of self-chosen action, and genuineness is secondary, similarly to how it is to Sartre or existential psychotherapists.

Growth sustained by an active search of the self, seen as a negotiation of virtues, role models, hero journeys is this time an open-ended pursuit. This authentic self is taking the form of what results from a cumulative sum of dispositional factors aided by an entrepreneurial mentality, starting with the quality and perseverance of individual strivings, combined with incidental factors like luck or finding a good partner, which can be a therapist, guru, guide or coach. The incidental factors are constructed in such a way that they seem to be subsumed not to chance or serendipity but to the quality of one's own motivation and vision: a governing underlying belief such as the so-called "law of attraction" suggests, for example, that if individuals know what they want and display adequate amounts of positive expectations, clarity and tenacity channeled towards those existential goals, the "universe will conspire". Aids, props, and chance will all mystically become part of the individual quest for the authentic self. The presumptive end result is advertised as something that is the opposite of a simple version of the self that is carved by conformism. Embedded in this understanding of the authentic self is the idea that prior to any attempt at self-discovery, self-realization, self-actualization, individuals are not necessarily fundamentally flawed (as the previous worldview assumes), but rather they usually come in this world as imperfect or incomplete, and are further constrained by education and sometimes by society and circumstances, to follow or continue to manifest these deficient, insufficient initial versions of themselves. The self-care industry promises a liberation from these constraints and promises the individual assistance in surpassing them. The end result is an ideal, or the "best version of the self". In contrast to the first version of the self, the one that is shedding all the external constraints to reach the liberty to manifest in its natural, uncensored, fundamentally human quality, which in the end seem to have a rather fixed or expected outcome, resembling a sartrian view of authentic living, in this view, authenticity seems to be closer to a process-based understanding. It is developmental and does not aim for an end goal that once is achieved, the state of authenticity can be declared.

The marketing of both these two versions of the selfhood describes the human being to us as one which is full of imperfections, vices, or, in the light of the medical model defining human development, full of pathological or subclinical tendencies or vulnerabilities. However, this view of the person is definitely more characteristic for the second model, which contains a melioristic account of the individual, one that expects and requires the hope for

⁴See Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. 2002. An overview of self-determination theory: An organismic-dialectical perspective. In *Handbook of self-determination research* edited by E. L. Deci & R. M. Ryan, 3–36. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press.

improvement. While the first one only wants people to have the liberty to manifest their true self as they are, warts and all, without a need for transformation, optimization or remedy, the second one is dependent on an idea of authenticity edification as a series of deficits-that-need-to-be-overcome model. The individual needs to be measured, defined, put into certain parameters defined in connection to minimal standards or benchmarks, be they in terms of cognitive, social functioning, or ethical standards. The individual is expected to perform within certain limits and anything that deviates from those are seen as a lack of genuineness. Advertising this conception of the individual creates the artificial need to seek for an artificial, commodified authenticity. People are called to engage into various types of projects of uncovering better, improved versions of themselves that will help them transcend the gullible, conformist masses, and bring improvements or the repair needed to compensate the shortcomings in their self-constitution. The deficit or vulnerability is overcome through self-exploration, self-discovery, creative journeys that are completely free of any constraints, including – in recent times – the tyranny of cancel culture. The threat of cancel culture and the free-speech police is nevertheless more marked in the first model, because it is seen as a barrier, an inhibiting factor that seeks to delegitimize attempts at limitless self-expression. In this view, cancel culture and political correctness are oppressing factors that limit the possibility of authentic self-expression.

This artificially created need for constant self-discovery, self-growth and transformation is covered by constantly looking into inspirational spiritual activities or cultural products, but also quickly served by therapists, self-help gurus, wellness experts, yoga masters or special retreats. Spiritual practice, praying, travel or writing can be among the ways in which individuals can reach this genuine sense of self. In our opinion, this free-floating account of authenticity is questionable for several reasons. First, because of its vagueness and hollowness, anyone can define authenticity liberally, and have the liberty to include attitudes, ethical ideals, behaviors, attitudes or personal projects that are less virtuous. The individualistic authentic individual that is freeing themselves of societal constraints can easily consider morally dubious behaviors as natural manifestations of their legitimate search for authenticity. Denying external influences under the assumption they are problematic, questionable or simply interfering with the process of authentic self-discovery. Also, embedding self-reliance, self-determination and independence in this model has put into focus an imperative of freeing oneself of toxic influences, persons, ideas, habits or contexts. Interdependence and its corresponding mechanisms of solidarity are diluted with the help of guilt-releasing tropes: while searching for this true, authentic self, no one should feel bad, guilty, uncomfortable with the idea of freeing themselves of anything they might find “toxic” in their lives. As a result, we see a multiplication or normalization of phenomena that would otherwise be considered uncivil or antisocial like ghosting (the decision to cut off the ties with another person when the relationship is no longer “profitable” for the individual and the investment costs of maintaining it outweigh the benefits, and cutting it in a “traditional” way would incur the emotional cost or

discomfort). Self-care promoters are even selling ghosting as a healthy, well-deserved ritual of “cleansing” one’s social life of toxic (burdensome, undesired, uninteresting) relationships. There is one aspect of these New Age and popular psychological notions of the self that is crucial to understanding how authenticity became such a relative concept, especially in the political discourse of populist movements, as we will explain in the next part of the paper. This aspect is the idea of reinvention.

The culture of reinvention can certainly be traced back to the founding fathers that embody the idea of a “self-made man” as masculine ideals. These ideals, represented by Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, offer a recipe of success achieved out of nothing, through hard work, perseverance and practical intelligence, opposed to more European ideals proposed by the Enlightenment or Romantics, of a man tormented by ideas and crippled by doubts and anguish. Existential, humanistic psychology, positive psychotherapy and the self-help movement all put a special emphasis on the idea that at any point in time, any individual can start anew, by first defining a new way of being and thus reinvent themselves. By being “anything they want to be”, as the Queen innuendo invites believers, people can configure themselves differently starting at any moment.

Some authors go as far as supporting the idea that the political context has modeled and relentlessly advertised certain view of the self.⁵ More specifically, these authors believe psychological science, through its engagement with neoliberal system, has modeled a concept of a self that is radically removed from its social context, the self is mainly viewed through an entrepreneurial lens as an imperative for continuous growth; conversely, this way of understanding human functioning is only reinforcing the neoliberal system that generated them in the first place. The self-help literature and sometimes psychotherapists encourage radical changes in one’s live that involve giving up unhealthy habits, “toxic circumstances” or even “toxic people” in one’s life, as only form of achieving authentic self-expression also talk about “growth pains” associated to this. The view of authenticity that is radically individualistic that it cannot be achieved other than hitting a “reset” button that severs all the “bad” connections in one’s life, that stifle growth, has invented a name for the discomfort the individual has to go through to reach his dream of following his dreams and desires: “growth pains”. Recent models on relational authenticity rooted in the existential tradition doubt the possibility of calling this kind of severing of ties to one’s past that contains a big part of one’s narrative identity.⁶ According to this view, the mind is embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended (4E), in which the way we are with others and for others are absolutely crucial for our own understanding. The self is more of a collective production of meanings, narratives, experiences of

⁵See Adams, G., Estrada-Villalta, S., Sullivan, D., Markus, H. R. 2019. The psychology of neoliberalism and the neoliberalism of psychology: Neoliberalism of psychology. *Journal of Social Issues*. 75(1), 189–216.

⁶See Gallagher, S., Morgan, B. and Rokotnitz, N. 2018. Relational authenticity. In *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, edited by O. Flanagan and G. Caruso, 126–145. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

learning and authenticity is more of a dialogue in which the person negotiates his view of the self in interaction with others.

Populism and Authenticity

All these self-care and self-enhancements trends from popular psychology and spirituality practices have spilled over in the political communication realm. In her book, “Populocracy: the tyranny of authenticity and the rise of populism”, Catherine Fieschi makes the point that authenticity is at the heart of populist political movements arising all over the Western world. However, she points out that what we are dealing with is in fact a skewed, perverted notion of authenticity that is advocating for a politics “rooted in instinct rather than wisdom”, that is “useful (1) to brand all others as hypocrites; (2) as a blanket excuse to speak one's mind in ways that are as disruptive as possible, unbounded by received social and political norms; and (3) to make good on the populist claim that instinct and common sense trump reason and strategy.”⁷

In her opinion, this new vision of authenticity pits reason (as a characteristic of the elites, prone to being deceiving and exploitative) against instinct, not against emotion. At its core, authenticity seeks to promote the legitimacy of the politics of the gut, against head and heart. This concept proposed by Fieschi reflects a peculiar vision of the individual and the masses that he is both leading and also attempting to reflect with high fidelity. This vision is not described in positive, idealistic, melioristic terms, but instead is rather dominated by deep, atavistic forces, instincts, many times containing harmful consequences, implying that this is what in fact ordinary humans are hardwired to do: being prone to follow self-interest, to lie, deceive, have shortcomings and being prone to succumbing to bad habits and indulging in all sorts of vices, with little regard to the social impact. Acting based on these instincts cannot be – via a naturalistic fallacy contained by this worldview – held against the individual, because it is only reflective of one’s real nature, uncorrupted by empty moralistic norms and conventions. There is a sense of impunity attached to the socially desirable notion of the true, authentic, spontaneous self that individuals are entitled to in this view. Embedded in this, you have a convenient, readily accessible and hard to debate excuse and/or rationalization for any bad behavior: the accusation cannot be fairly held against one, because the act that it addresses is only a manifestation or reflection of one's profound humanity. Lying upfront, openly deceiving others with a sneer and a shrug is what creates for the new populist politician the illusion of transparency, of sincerity. The more open a person is about one’s shortcomings, the better. Immorality and corruption are natural consequences of acting according to one’s moral constitution, thus secondary elements one can get away with as long as the relation with one’s audience stays in the same transparent parameters. Speaking or acting

⁷Fieschi, Catherine. 2019. *Populocracy: the tyranny of authenticity and the rise of populism*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing, p. 36.

outrageously, inciting the people to do the same in an attempt to defy the order and principles that govern a corrupt, deceiving and manipulative elite are the factor that constitute signals or this commitment for transparency. To quote the former president of the United States addressing his followers: “All those decencies that irritate and chafe you, that you don’t dare disregard? I dare. I dare for you.” A perverted sense of authenticity that is a hollow concept that is inclusive to anything morally questionable is what paves this politics of shamelessness. This is why populist leaders who only talk the talk but fail to demonstrate how far they would go don’t have long-lasting careers.

Populism's empty idea of authenticity strives to oppose a corrupt elite to a silent majority that struggles to make its voice heard and is looking for the perfect representatives to do it on their behalf. Disillusioned and resentful, this majority seems to wait for a leader that absolves them of their invisibility, by voicing their needs and wants, by “telling it as it is”, in other words, voicing their own thoughts. To be convincing of this intention, the new populist leaders have to be able to display a radical authenticity: showing themselves as they are, warts and all, with defects or vices, like any other human. Unfortunately, this acceptance or even open embrace of one's faults and shortcomings comes not only with moral relativism, a trivialization of otherwise unacceptable wrong acts, but with a full description of immorality as a virtue. If being in the wrong is what means to be authentic, and being authentic is the goal (in opposition to the deceitful elites), that moral failings are not only expected, but invited as an expression of humanity and a proof of one’s bona fide. They are a sign the person is willing to break any rule for the sake of the common good of the people, it is a measure of how far they can go to fight the elites, to display the courage that the masses allegedly lack. In other words, as long as they signal the fact that they could “sell their own mother” any day, they imply that they would go any length in the service of their supporters.

This is what Donald Trump is promising to his audience, a promise he will embody the unrestricted urges that his followers are “too decent” to do it. A promise that is both flattering and patronizing, a promise that he will do the work for them, because it has what it takes: courage, persistence but also shamelessness. Shamelessness is in business contexts regarded and praised as a virtue, one that reflects incisiveness and decisiveness. He brings it into the world of politics, where tact and restraint have been the rule for decades, and where no one attempted to change the status quo of fear of not being seen as civil enough. This kind of courage is what it takes to free this world of its alleged hypocrisy, to drain the swamp, as his rhetoric goes. A google search of the words “Trump” and “decency” results in dozens of articles weighing in the dangerous demagoguery practiced for years in the White House but also before it became institutionalized. The effects of this continuous war against decency, that not only implies talking the talk, but also walking the walk, by full display of bigotry and shamelessness, is best witnessed with the attack of the Capitol, when riled up mobs desecrated the government building, some of them smearing feces on its walls. In a way, he did change the rules and created a push for transparency, but he unfortunately changed the tone of political debate.

Decency is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “behavior that is good, moral and acceptable in society”. In other words, the promise of normalizing transgressions is how he motivates his supporters. Decency has been implied as a performative, calculated political performance, a staple of the corrupt elite and establishment that needs to be dismantled and, ideally, replaced by a new, transparent being. By self-indulging, Trump lets his base know that it's ok to be whatever you are, to tap in your deep resources, to transparently display your true self, in other words, authentic. Self-indulgence is the natural trait, but also a new virtue and a political communication tool to signal the bona fide (one that says something along the lines of: I am just a simple human being, I am just like you, I am one of you).

Seneca's famous saying, “Errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum” is updated in the populist model to normalize the perseveration in evil. When everything becomes part of the normal human experience, hence subjected to impunity, evil itself becomes a profoundly human, hence acceptable quality. Persevering in evil is seen as even more essentially human than isolated acts of immoral behavior, covered as “slips” and buried under cosmetic gestures. In fact, relativizing everything puts populists in a role of impossible negotiation partners. By deciding what is wrong or right, blameworthy or not, true or false, they can ultimately get away with everything. Only forceful reactions, not logic nor sensitive reasons can lead them into making concessions.

In a way, there are several principles of authenticity that are applied here: an illusion of consistency (a perfect overlap between external characteristics and internal beliefs and values), a sense of connection between individual and the context, social, spatial, temporal, and a congruence between the individual's development and what is expected of him. To better understand this frame we will refer to a recently published paper that attempts to make light over the construct, at least from a psychological perspective, namely an organizational one. We choose to discuss this perspective because it contrasts both the kierkegaardian and the taylorist views of authenticity, at least from a few points of view.

The new described model of the human being, prone to wrongdoing is best represented by the “warts and all” politician, who is open about his incompetence and doesn't hide behind polished appearances, discourses and decencies. There is a true, deep, authentic people, the heart of the nation (and this is part of the populist rhetoric in several European countries but also in the United States), and there is an instinctive, natural, unspoken connection between that core/middle and the populist leaders. Aliens, foreigners but also minorities are considered incapable to grasp or access this essence, which is usually attached to a nation. Fieschi does not state it as such, but there is an essentialist view of authenticity that has only one hard core: the fallibility of the human nature. Coming back to Seneca's maxim, “perseverare diabolicum” is no longer seen as valid, as we witness a normalization of the perverted: what humanity is invited to admit and embrace, without getting fooled by civilizing appeals of the superior elite is the idea that persevering in mistake is profoundly human, thus tolerable. Humans, in this view, need to be accepted as beings that will perpetually be vulnerable to repeat their transgressions but in the same time able to redeem themselves. By

not being transparent about their shortcomings, by virtue signaling, by imposing complex, sophisticated authoritarian tools such as the attacks of the so-called cancel culture, the nagging constraints of political correctness, the elites are always depicted as irredeemable and manipulative. That is the populists' nemesis, the image of true evil, dressed up in appealing clothes and wearing the mask of justice and decency; in contrast, its hero is one that will not hide its shortcomings, even its imposture, and will fail, through repeated, owned errors. This conception of humanity pairs well with the right-wing populists' attempt to bring about any mention of their nation's or group's past sins. Holocaust denialism, denial of racism and xenophobia are also expressions of a paradoxical embrace of a culture of perpetual possibility of reinvention, as described before in the light of self-help cultures, but also as an autonomous choice of disregarding past sins as baggage that has to weight on the present. There is no demand put on continuity, congruence or judging individuals or nations in historical contexts. The truly "authentic people" are living in a perpetual here and now, defined by gut feelings and momentary whims. They do not need any of the sophistication and artificial complications of scholars and social justice warriors teaching them about historical justice.

The populist leaders find answers to problems by using their intuition, their "street smarts", by following gut feelings, by oversimplifying. This builds a strong resistance and contempt towards anything that is characterized by detail, complexity or sophistication. The anti-intellectual, anti-scientific ethos present in most populist movements stems from and in the same time justifies exactly this view of human intelligence and success: genuine leaders and successful people have some sort of practical intelligence, they base their actions on a gut feeling that doesn't need the validation of logic, evidence, philosophical, ethical or scientific theories. The religious element is only invoked when it is seen as adequate in rejecting progressive views, such as gay marriage, reproductive rights or sexual education.

At the other end of the political spectrum, the New Age influencers or spiritual leaders that also claim profoundly moral goals attached to their strivings, but this time having less to do with loyalty to a group and keeping it intact, have a similarly mystifying theory of how we reach the truth and make decisions. For this particular category, in many instances, the path to truth is the opposite of the search for oversimplification seen in populist discourses: in their case, there is some sort of occult, impossible to reveal path to truth or genuine knowledge of self and society. It is its inherent complexity that makes it inaccessible to everyone. This belief paves the way to embracing the same anti-scientific attitude of populism, which is increasingly intolerant of the complexity, sophistication and non-negotiable demands of intellectual rigor.

There are several places where the spiritual language of progressives and right wing populism have met during the past years and months, in addition to this dismissal of open appeal to rational, scientific, logical explanations of phenomena and as grounds for politics: first, there is a common importance put on purity as moral foundation, more than others, such as care/harm. While populists see the political opponent, namely the establishment, as corrupted and

hypocritical, its goal is its elimination, sometimes with little concern on the means. For the spiritual progressive movements that promote authenticity as constant individualistic construction and self-development, the purity core refers to a return to the natural, to the organic, to the sacred. They both reside also on a combination of instinct and gut feeling when making life choices, too. In Fieschi's words: "Claims to authenticity enable populist discourse to contrast the unmediated natural intelligence or instinct of the people (who are authentic) with the acquired knowledge, book-learning, and (untrustworthy) sophistication of the elite. In this populist world view, anyone's intimation that an issue might not be clear cut, or that hesitating might be understandable given the issue's complexity, are all taken as symptomatic of a weakness of character, and of potential corruptibility: problems need to be approached with common sense and pragmatism, and solutions should be obvious to those who have the interest of people at heart. Invoking complexity is seen as an attempt to bamboozle the people. Claims of "being right" must be the product of instinct, or they are not to be trusted. There is no room for grey areas. So, for example, emancipating one's self from the community of the nation (through travel, curiosity, hybridity and dual identities) necessarily amounts to a rejection of the natural, unbroken, and unspoken link to the people."⁸

This connection to the natural, unbroken, and unspoken link to the people is the staple of the relational politics of authenticity. It is also the glue that binds spiritual leaders, cult leaders and gurus to their audiences. A deep connection, an unspoken, mystical relationship that is ungraspable by the human mind, that just "develops" and "happens", that just is. It also does not need legitimation from rational means. Its only epistemic validation is the "feeling of". For populists, having access to that true knowledge it is about being part of the authentic people, about coming from the "deep", "authentic" nation, which is uncorrupted by education or cosmopolitanism; likewise, for the spiritual individual, it is about being an "old soul" that knows the truth when he sees it. What is specific to populism is, still, the fact that authenticity is an answer to the problem of shame and humiliation, a quick fix to solve what Michael Sandel (2020) calls the "crisis of dignity" and backlash against the tyranny of meritocracy from the less educated. Coming back to Fieschi's idea, this means that authenticity meets the role of dealing with shame and humiliation: "Speaking outrageous truths, pretending to believe them, but also speaking truth outrageously, voicing opinions that are at the very limit of taboo, all of this is about triumphing over shame – by speaking. Conquering the perceived humiliation inflicted by the elite by being, literally, shameless, whether this is the perceived, collective humiliation of being relegated to the status of medium-sized power; or the individual humiliation of not having the right educational credentials, or cultural reference points. All these can be temporarily addressed, or rather eclipsed, by outrageously human bad behavior. In this respect, authenticity is also what "ups the ante"; it is what accounts for the sense of a spiral that lead from insinuation, to accusation, to half-truth, to lie, to enormous lie, and finally, to conspiracy theory."⁹ Fieschi masterfully explains

⁸*Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁹*Ibidem*, pp. 38-39.

how this hollow concept of authenticity brings the idea of a special kind of intuition that grants access to uncorrupted truths and human essence and turns it against itself. When authenticity becomes the right to express and promote lies, the term loses any ability to reflect the quality of truthfulness, being instead inhabited only by a heideggerian nuance, that of *Eigentlichkeit*. The same nuance that models such as the self-determination theory of existential psychotherapy prefer: that of ownership and autonomy. Authenticity moves its meanings almost entirely to ownership, and by a blatant disregard of truth, attempts a mutation in the concept of truth itself. Actually, this is exactly what the “post-truth” politics is achieving when it is trying to strip objective facts of their legitimacy in the way details of politics are discussed.

Why is it important to reclaim the meaning of authenticity and strive to restore it as a moral virtue that is not completely devoid of contents or it is not free-floating? An empirical argument can stem from Gino, Kouchaki and Galinsky, whose series of studies indicate that the degree to which individuals see themselves as authentic or inauthentic affects their feelings of being moral or pure.¹⁰ This, in turn, leads them to engage in prosocial behavior, to compensate for the feelings of impurity. Other researchers claim that there is a mutual relationship between authenticity and moral behaviors¹¹ (Zhang, Sang, Chan, & Schlegel, 2019). Their series of studies indicate that behaving morally determines people to evaluate themselves as authentic. Vice-versa, when prompted to act as their “true” selves, rather than following a rational decision-making process or thinking realistic, in other words, how they think they would act if confronted with the situation in reality, people tended to show the most unwillingness to engage in moral behaviors. However, going further than these interesting results that indicate deep and significant consequences of authenticity, we cannot observe the fact that empirical studies rely on incomplete or unconvincing definitions of authenticity. Giving authenticity substance as a psychological construct is not the point of the present article, but we need to underline the fact that we cannot rely on a body of literature that fails to offer a good conceptual validity to its core element. In a recent theoretical paper, Damman, Friederichs, Lebedinski and Liesenfeld take on the goal of describing and delivering the essence of authenticity.¹² They expand on the model proposed by Lehman and colleagues¹³ that has three dimensions: consistency (the correspondence between the internal and external manifestations of a person, between what it is shown and their values), conformity (a correspondence between the individual and social norms) and connection (a correspondence or congruence between individual and a certain interpersonal

¹⁰See Gino, F., Kouchaki, M., & Galinsky, A. D. 2015. The moral virtue of authenticity: How inauthenticity produces feelings of immorality and impurity. *Psychological Science*, 26, 983–996.

¹¹See Zhang, H., Sang, Z., Chan, D. K. & Schlegel, R. J. 2019. The Authentic Moral Self: Dynamic Interplay between Perceived Authenticity and Moral Behaviors in the Workplace. *Collabra: Psychology*, 5(1), 48. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1525/collabra.260>.

¹²See Dammann, O., Friederichs, K.M., Lebedinski, S. and Liesenfeld, K., M. 2020. The Essence of Authenticity. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (Jan 2021) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.629654>.

¹³See Lehman, D. W., O’Connor, K., Kovács, B., and Newman, G. E. 2019. Authenticity. *Academy of Management Annals*, 13, 1–42.

context, in time and place). To Lehman's model, they add continuity, which is the correspondence between "an entity and features of development", in other words, favoring a more process perspective, in the detriment of a static one. We welcome this view and believe it is getting closer to the kierkegaardian concept of authenticity, and in a way, can be helpful in the attempt to operationalize it as a useful navigation tool for the taylorist conception too.

Concluding Remarks

To recap, we analyzed how, in the context of a democratization of knowledge coupled with the rise of anti-intellectual, anti-scientific social movements, authenticity evolved in several questionable ways. For instance, abused as self-help fad, promoted as a psychology superstar concept that put an exaggerated emphasis on individualistic definitions and soon became an instrument of neoliberalism; it recently turned into an influencers' asset, and even a central element of populist ideologies that currently tends to become more mainstream. We believe that authenticity's uses and abuses can generate negative outcomes, especially in adverse historical contexts, such as the present one, when the success of various forms of rhetoric can lead to extremely negative outcomes, such as catastrophic measures taken by populist leaders, successful influencers spreading conspiracy theories interfering with the control of a global pandemic, all gaining increasing support from people who actively endorse this rhetoric. The question that we need to address further is how we can reclaim back the concept of authenticity from the abuses we discussed. In line with Taylor, we believe that first, we tend to follow Taylor in emphasizing the fact that even when we see it as a personal, individualistic standard, we cannot separate the understanding of an authentic life in the absence of the ideal of a good life, one that comes with responsabilization. This responsabilization means questioning one's own ideals, convictions or even ethical principles, and the implied eventuality of changing them, in light of new facts, events, or self-discovery. These cannot be done, of course, in the absence of an ethical set of rules that is socially situated. In Kierkegaard's terms, it is an attitude of perpetual questioning of one's own deepest creeds and commitments.

We are at this point indebted to answer how can Kierkegaard's account of authenticity save the present age from the hollow versions of it: an individualistic pursuit characterized by a hedonic search of an erratic self, with no moral commitments, other than to oneself, namely building and enforcing boundaries of the self; an allegedly self-transcending authenticity that represents committing to mystifying spiritual practices or adheres to nationalistic agendas and identities that enclose the individual in a tribal mindset. What is unique to Kierkegaard's view of authenticity is what might operate as an antidote to the empty promises of a contemporary popular understanding of it: a provocative attitude towards self-construction, one of skepticism and continuous questioning.

Any quest of authenticity should depend on perpetually asking oneself: How does my project of self-transformation includes a reflective and responsible

attitude on its effects on the larger social context? Can I suspect my project to be only following a hollow ideological prescription that seems to be purely performative, with an aesthetic, superficial self-expressive appeal that might just neutralize dissent or perform the role of a technology of what is, in the words of Kierkegaard, leveling? While trying to find and embody a true, deep self, individuals might, in fact, succumb to a culturally prescribed phenomenon, thus spending all their energies serving the perpetuation of structural, socio-economic ills. In the era of widespread mindfulness practice and an obsession with well-being that replaces religious rituals, authenticity sounds more like silencing of the mind and calming the seeds of dissent, reminding us the description Kierkegaard provided us in *The present age*: “Whereas a passionate age accelerates, raises up and overthrows, elevates and debases, a reflective apathetic age does the opposite, it stifles and impedes, it levels. Leveling is a quiet, mathematical, abstract enterprise that avoids all agitation.”¹⁴ In a way, it pacifies by keeping people engaged in immediacy.

In the so-called post-truth era, the account of authenticity most widely present in the popular discourse proposes an ideal individual that resembles the image of Don Juan from Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*: The individual who refuses to look back to his own actions, and implicitly refuses to reflect on them, to identify his commitments and measure his actions against them, then reconsider his goals or means based on this reflection. In this way, he is always seeking to be someone else, someone new, in search for something else, and something new. Maximizing his pleasure seems to be his only commitment, his neophilia his guiding value, and a life philosophy that denigrates regret, being apologetic or condoning the pressure to think about the common good. Confronted with his misdeeds, he immediately plays victim. Relationships and any other form of engagements (like professional or spiritual ones) are only important and nurture as long as they provide instant gratification, they satisfy the need for interestingness and novelty, then sacrificed the moment they stop to provide any personal benefit. He does not search any depth or meaning in his existential adventures, because the sense of coherence is not important. Repetition, just like coherence, is dismissed, and disguised in ethical commitments, like a need for look for personal improvement or reformation. Starting anew, coming clean is only reflecting the opposite of what it looks. Instead of redemption, it actually serves the rejection of the past, especially of its sinful aspects.

Promoting the ideal of a life lived in aesthetic immediacy like Don Juan, and selling it as an ethical ideal makes way for new virtues: being relentlessly shameless, self-indulgent, unapologetic, unrestraint, non-attached and non-committed to any standard or relationship. Sporadically, there will be some self-transcending goals or commitments that examined closely, are either ghosts or chimeras. These nonbinding commitments can be anything, from finding one’s natural spirit, connecting to the true soul of a nation or motherland, to being one with an omnipotent, universal power. The role of these null or inoperative

¹⁴*The Essential Kierkegaard*. 2000. Edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 258.

commitments in the way to one's authentic, true, deep self, is to confuse and divert the attention from the truth: the only loyalty is for oneself (and, sometimes, the tribe). Freedom is actually read in its most individualistic definition, as libertinism, and exclusion of the other. This lack of restraint and commitment is what allows the post-truth individual, and Don Juan, to live in the horizon of infinite possibilities.

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