Philosophy of Authenticity

Inspired by the BBC Radio4 programme: In Our Time with Melvyn Bragg

Jos Burton – March 2023

The concept of authenticity has been an important theme in philosophy throughout the history of Western thought, from the ancient Greeks to contemporary postmodern thinkers. While the meaning and significance of authenticity have evolved over time, it has remained a central concern for many philosophers seeking to understand the nature of human existence.

In ancient Greek philosophy, the concept of authenticity was closely tied to the idea of living a virtuous life. Plato, for example, argued that the highest form of human flourishing came from living a life of virtue, which required being true to oneself and one's principles. Aristotle similarly emphasized the importance of living a life of virtue, which he saw as requiring authenticity in one's actions and intentions.

In medieval philosophy, the concept of authenticity was often tied to religious or spiritual concerns, with many thinkers emphasizing the importance of living a life of faith and devotion. St. Augustine, for example, argued that authenticity required living a life that was centred on God, and that the pursuit of worldly goods and pleasures could only lead to a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction.

During the Enlightenment, the concept of authenticity took on a more secular and individualistic character. Philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant emphasized the importance of individual autonomy and self-determination, arguing that living an authentic life required being true to oneself and one's own desires and aspirations.

In the 19th century, the concept of authenticity continued to evolve, with thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard emphasizing the importance of individual creativity and self- expression. Nietzsche, in particular, argued that authenticity required creating one's own values and goals, rather than conforming to the norms and expectations of society.

In the 20th century, existentialist and phenomenological thinkers further developed the concept of authenticity, emphasizing the importance of personal freedom, responsibility, and authenticity in one's actions and choices. Martin Heidegger, for example, argued that authenticity required confronting the fundamental questions of human existence and taking responsibility for one's own life, rather than relying on external sources of meaning or value.

In the postmodern era, the concept of authenticity has taken on new meanings and forms, as many thinkers have questioned the very idea of a fixed, stable sense of self or identity. Postmodernists such as Jean- Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have emphasized the role of language and representation in shaping our sense of self and the world around us, and have called into question the very possibility of an authentic self or identity.

Despite these various approaches to the concept of authenticity, one theme that runs throughout much of the philosophical discourse on this topic is the importance of personal integrity and sincerity. Whether one sees authenticity as requiring living a life of virtue, self-determination, or creative self- expression, the common thread is a commitment to being true to oneself and one's values.

In conclusion, the philosophy of authenticity has been an important and evolving theme throughout the history of Western thought. From ancient Greek notions of living a virtuous life to contemporary postmodern critiques of the very idea of a fixed self, authenticity has remained a central concern for philosophers seeking to understand the nature of human existence. While the meaning and significance of authenticity have varied across time and place, the importance of personal integrity and sincerity has remained a consistent theme throughout much of the philosophical discourse on this topic.

Now that you've followed this far – what do you think to the above? How authentic did it all sound to you? What would you think if you learnt – that is, if you haven't guessed already – that I didn't write a single of word of it. Or indeed, that no-one wrote it – or no human being did! It was in fact entirely generated by Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) via ChatGPT.

I simply asked ChatGPT to write me an essay on the subject of 'Authenticity in Philosophy' from the Ancient Greeks to the Postmodernists. And voila – here you are – it took less than 10 seconds! And the essay is uncannily similar in tone and content to the In Our Time programme (BBC Radio 4) titled Authenticity.

So how authentic is the writing above? If instead of using A.I. I had used Google to search out philosophical examples of authenticity and used those to create an essay – how authentic would that be? What if I had taken notes from the In Our Time programme and presented my thoughts on those examples would that have been any more authentic?

Instead, it took A.I. less than 10 seconds!

When we consider authenticity in other areas of human endeavour such as art, literature, music etc. – we think about being able to connect the work (painting, sculpture, poetry) with its creator – whether that person signed, or 'authorised' it (declared it their own) or if they produced it anonymously…

When it comes to authenticity in our everyday lives, consider this: what happens when someone is 'acting' out of character – or we say they are 'not themselves' – who are they? For us to make that observation, we would need to know what they are 'normally' like, and what we take to be their 'true' character or style…

You may compare the writing produced by ChatGPT (above) with what you are reading now – or you may already be familiar with my previous writing/articles - do you feel it's more 'authentic' than the first part? What is it that makes it more recognisably mine: the work of Jos Burton?

Working in the commercial world of business, Authenticity is a hot topic these days – from leadership qualities to team membership - we grapple with concepts of integrity and sincerity, and how these translate into our everyday actions and behaviours.

The definition for Authenticity that we most often arrive at goes something like:

When our actions/behaviours align (are consistent) with our values and our sense of self.

But what is a 'self'? And how are we 'true' to it?

The philosopher Philip Pettit suggests as human beings we are "Agents with the capacity to personate" (as opposed to 'impersonating' or acting like someone else) and that we all have three selves:

1. The Referenced Self - referring to myself, the agent that is implicated in my acts, the continuing point of reference of 'I' 'me' - the 'self' I refer to throughout my life: past, present, and future.

2. The Personated Self - the persona (or ego?) that I create and 'authorise' - one that I 'authenticate' (commit/invest in) to myself and to others - and that I co-personate (co-create) thru interactions with others (actively and passively); the self that I am 'true' to (avow/pledge) to which I hold myself accountable.

3. The Distanced (third person) Self - how others describe you, qualities ascribed to you by others, your 'unauthorised' self, your public self, your 'brand/reputational' self – what people say about you when you're not there.

As the Postmodernists have suggested – if a 'self' really is complex, nuanced and variable - not fixed or static – is it indeed possible to be true to something so mutable and nebulous? And does this mean that authenticity (along with integrity and sincerity) are less meaningful concepts than we first thought?