In Defense of Authenticity

On Art, Religion and the Authentic Self

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In the seventies of the twentieth century authenticity became a criterion for judging people, their products and institutions in Western Europe and North America. But the last two decades have seen mounting criticism of the idea of individual authenticity. In the nineties it was increasingly held that ‘authenticity’ is a subjectivist and egocentric ideal and that its requirement has led to the moral crisis we find ourselves in nowadays.

The critics certainly do have a point, but tend to underestimate the importance of authenticity because of the factual derailment of the ideal in ‘the culture of narcissism,’ the consumer society, the culture of greed.\footnote{To name some in the USA: Daniel Bell, Allan Bloom and Christopher Lasch (The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Warner Books, 1979)), and in the Netherlands: Maarten Doorman and Ad Verbrugge.} Besides critics, there are those who have worked at consolidation and repair of the ideal.\footnote{For instance Charles Taylor, Alessandro Ferrara and Bas van Stokkom.} In support of this last group, this paper starts from the idea that ‘authenticity’ pays attention to everyone’s unique individuality, and that the moral crisis we find ourselves in may well point to a loss of self and a lack of authenticity,\footnote{Cf. Bas van Stokkom, “Sensitief kapitaal: De revisie van het authenticiteitsideaal” (Sensitive Capital: The Revision of the Ideal of Authenticity), Krisis 76:3 (1999), 65–77.} rather than to an overestimation of their value.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has reacted to the critics of authenticity as well as to the corruption of ‘authenticity’ in his The Culture of Authenticity, his Sources of the Self, and, to a lesser degree, in A Secular Age. Taylor admits that individualization and ‘authenticity’ have led to lapses, but maintains the idea of the authentic individual as an ideal. He makes a plea for self-realization that does not forget one’s own sources and backgrounds, something the adherents of the ideal of authenticity have so often been accused of.\footnote{See for instance Ad Verbrugge’s criticism of Enlightenment individualism in his philippic against the individualist spirit of our times. Ad Verbrugge, Tijd van onbehagen: Filosofische essays over een cultuur op drift (Time of Discontent: Philosophical Essays on a Culture Adrift) (Amsterdam: SUN, 2004), 202–223.}

Taylor ascribes a special role to the arts in the realization of authenticity: we discover and become who we are in what we create. Since Romanticism, thus
Taylor, creativity and expression of one’s unique self have become a mission because they enable everybody to supply his or her unique contribution to reality. This happens in language too, but for Taylor the work of art is paradigmatic.

Charles Taylor sees ‘authenticity’ as “powered by Christianity.” In *A Secular Age* he argues in favor of ‘the return of religion,’ and ends the book with a chapter on conversions and “self-authenticating” religious experiences, thus relating his treatment of authenticity to his religious conviction in an encompassing critique of our culture.5

In this contribution I shall follow Taylor in his defense of ‘authenticity’ in relation to religion, but also in the importance he attaches to the arts. I shall try to sharpen Taylor’s ideas on authenticity, religion and the role of the arts in Western civilization. First an idea of authenticity will be stipulated, if only to forestall a few standard critiques of ‘authenticity.’ (To be sure: the suggestion is not that authenticity is the highest value, let alone that it is the only one. Moreover, it will be put forward as a critical concept, the way it in fact functioned since being introduced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.6) Next, I will go into the religious dimension of authenticity and the relation of the arts to the ideal of authenticity: the arts as being paradigmatic of authenticity (but not necessarily its only or even ultimate representative).

A prominent position will be given here to the oeuvre of Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, nineteenth-century Danish Protestant philosopher-theologian-author—conspicuously absent in Taylor’s voluminous *A Secular Age.* Kierkegaard published his *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric* in 1843 under the pseudonym Johannes de silentio.7 The little book is about Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac and Abraham’s faith that he will receive his son back. *Fear and Trembling* will function here as a source of ideas on authenticity. At the end of this contribution Kierkegaard’s oeuvre as a whole will be put forward as an instance of religious art in a culture of authenticity.