Somogy Varga


Authenticity is a slippery concept. It is a product of modernity and was especially prominent in the last century, though it has been a theme in philosophy and literature since Rousseau. It has not, however, always gone by the same name, nor has the word “authenticity” had the same meaning wherever it appeared in print. Moreover, the concept is alive not just in intellectual discourse, but in the culture at large: as Charles Taylor has observed, it is central to our late modern understanding of ourselves and animates many of the practices we now take for granted as normal and desirable (consider the kind of self-fashioning and self-presentation that is virtually built into the very idea of having and maintaining a personal Facebook page).

But what exactly is authenticity? How is it to be defined, analyzed, and assessed? And how does it function as a living ethical ideal in contemporary social life? In this stimulating little book, Somogy Varga proposes interesting and plausible answers to these questions, but he also has a more ambitious agenda, namely, to offer a conception of authenticity that will serve as a normative ideal for a critical social theory in the ballpark – if not exactly in the *tradition* – of thinkers like Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth.

To understand that ambition at all, it is necessary to see, as Varga plausibly maintains, that authenticity is an ethical concept that differs from and goes beyond the concept of autonomy (which most philosophers probably still regard as its more respectable older sibling). To be autonomous is to be self-governing, according to some legislative principle; to be authentic is to be (somehow, in some sense) true to yourself, faithful to who you happen to be. Varga convincingly rejects two prominent accounts of what that loyalty to self amounts to. On what he calls the “inner sense” model, traceable to Rousseau, the self is a given thing, and being authentic means discerning it and getting your actions and your attitudes in harmony with it. The “productionist” model, associated with thinkers like Nietzsche and Foucault, by contrast, conceives of authenticity not as conformity to an already given self, but as the making of a self, analogous to artistic creation. However else these two accounts may be implausible or fail to capture what is distinctive and important about authenticity, they are clearly inadequate to Varga’s aim of providing an ethical basis for a critical social theory, since they say nothing about how either being in harmony with your given self or creating your self manages to have any normative force on how you conduct your life. What if your given self is a monster? What if the self you create is rotten?
In place of the inner sense and the productionist misconstruals of authenticity, Varga offers a richer, far more plausible account of the authentic self as not given but constituted by its own actions and attitudes, and as not freely created but embedded in and constrained by a world of limited resources and possibilities. Varga is sensitive to what he rightly calls the “phenomenological complexity” of the experiences involved in being (or failing to be) true to yourself, so his account is hard to sum up in a phrase or a slogan. Crucial to it, however, is an idea inspired by Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt, namely, that authenticity must involve a felt sense of practical or volitional necessity, classically captured in Luther’s (apocryphal) declaration, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” That sense of must is not the “must” of the moral law (though in historical fact Luther certainly thought of himself as conforming to a wholly external religious duty), but rather a sentiment of wholehearted commitment to what Varga calls an “alternativeless” choice, that is, a choice not among a range of thinkable options, but the contrary of which is, at an extreme, simply (as we say) unthinkable.

Varga is also sensitive to the worry that the normativity he finds in the necessity of wholehearted commitments, while articulating an ethical ideal for a critical theory, might also threaten to render the concept of authenticity overly prescriptive, indeed paternalistic. He tries to save his account from paternalism by calling it “formal” and “minimal,” but I wonder whether the charge is so easily deflected. He is surely right that there can be no purely formal social theory, since positive conceptions of the good are always inevitably at play in attempts to articulate and realize ideals of freedom and justice. Still, a broadly liberal theory has good reason to remain suspicious of an ethical concept as robust as authenticity, which goes beyond those ideals and projects a very particular image of the good life. After all, even in the minimal form that Varga presents and defends, and however attractive it might seem to your or me, the notion of authenticity specifies a kind of life – a life of wholehearted commitment to socially embedded, contextually motivated projects – that one still might reasonably reject or despise. No one thinks authenticity is an obligation, of course. The argument is instead that a decent and just society ought to afford people the conditions and resources to live authentically – if they want to, and if they can manage it. But whether they do or not is surely more a matter of personal ethical orientation than of social justice. Why should the concept of authenticity, any more than any other notion of virtue or wellbeing, enter into a normative social theory at all, except as one among several possible styles of life? Varga’s attempt to insert the concept into the foundations of a critical theory might strike some as too much like the kind of moral prescription that liberalism has done well to eschew.