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Living Authentic: "Being True to Yourself" as a Contemporary Moral Ideal

[Nicholas Hookway](#) | [Volume 18](#) | [Issue 1](#) | [March 2015](#) | ['authentic'](#)

Introduction

From reality television and self-help literature to exhortations to be "true to yourself," authenticity pervades contemporary culture. Despite their prevalence, cultures of self-improvement and authenticity are routinely linked to arguments about increasing narcissism and declining care for others. Self-improvement involves self-based practices geared to help realise the "improved" and "better you" while authenticity is focused on developing the unique, inner and "real" you. Critiques of both self-improvement and authenticity culture are particularly evident in a sociological tradition of "cultural pessimism" (Hookway, *Moral*). This group of thinkers argue that the dominance of a "therapeutic" culture where the "self improved is the ultimate concern of modern culture" has catastrophic social and moral consequences (Reiff; Bell; Lasch; Bellah; Bauman and Donskis). Drawing upon Charles Taylor, I take critical aim at such assessments, arguing that ideals and practices of authenticity can be morally productive. I then turn to an empirical investigation of how everyday Australians understand and practice morality based on a qualitative analysis of 44 Australian blogs combined with 25 follow-up online in-depth interviews. I suggest that while the data shows the prevalence and significance of "being true to yourself" as an orientating principle, the bloggers produce a version of authenticity that misses the relational and socially-shaped character of self and morality (Taylor; Vannini and Williams).

Authenticity and Narcissism

A key tenet of modern cultural diagnosis (Rieff, Bell; Lasch; Bellah; Bauman and Donskis) is that Westerners have become increasingly "narcissistic" as cultural authority weakens and the self becomes something to "be discovered" and "worked out" (Bauman). Rieff, a key proponent of this tradition, locates the problem specifically with the rise of therapeutic culture in the 1960s, which denied the proper prohibitive function of culture and transformed moral problems into analytic issues for the self-actualising and "authentic" self. Bell identifies growing consumerism and weakening religion as

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issuing a shift from a culture of restraint to a culture of release, resulting in an unparalleled permissiveness, hedonism and potential nihilism. More recently, Bauman and Donskis (13) argue that our consumerist pursuit of "authentic" or "peak" experiences tears apart the once solid social bonds of the past. For these theorists, a modern culture postulating the uniqueness and authenticity of the individual can only result in a diminishing care for others and a self-defeating culture of self-fulfilment.

Lasch launches perhaps the most scathing critique of "authenticity" culture. Lasch asserts that the modern West has seen the emergence of a "culture of narcissism:" a culture pathologically preoccupied with the care and well-being of the self. He contends that meaning and morality comes to be increasingly defined through the lens of "psychic self-improvement" and "an intense preoccupation with the self" (Lasch 25). Lasch writes:

Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to relate', overcoming the 'fear of pleasure' (Lasch 4).

This search for self-fulfilment within the private realm of the self offers little hope of escape in Lasch's analysis. It is a symptom of the disease rather than a treatment. Having sacrificed obedience to a higher authority for an intensive focus on the authentic and self-actualising self, the modern West is left with amoral, uncaring and "narcissistic" selves (Lasch). In the end, morality has little hope in a culture in which the individual is allowed to create their "own set of rules," where "no" has disappeared from our moral vocabulary, and where foundational moral laws enforced by religious tradition and higher moral authorities have disappeared.

Self-Improvement and Authenticity as Moral Ideals

A central problem with cultural decline accounts is that they miss how the search for personal authenticity or self-discovery could be morally productive (Taylor). Practices of therapy and self-improvement do not always need to be one-dimensionally read as exemplars of narcissism (Wright). For example, it is important to recognise how contemporary therapeutic and confessional cultures, underpinned by a focus on self-authenticity, self-discovery and personal growth, can emphasise the "moral makeover" or becoming a "better" person (Elliott and Lemert 124). Talk-shows, self-help literature, reality TV and blogging are all cultural examples that underpin how the therapeutic search for authenticity does not have to read as a one-way road to shrinking moral concern.

Lasch's indices of moral decline—"the wisdom of the east" or "eating health food"—can also be read in a more positive moral light. Take yoga, meditation and

vegetarianism as examples. These practices are growing rapidly in popularity in Australia (Penman; Hookway, *Moral*) and have a strong cultural focus on values of authenticity. While these self-practices emphasise personal growth, self-awareness and self-care, at the same time they promote ethical relations of responsibility between self, others, body, nature, animals and environment. As actor Gillian Anderson said: "the whole thing about meditation and yoga is about connecting to the higher part of yourself, and then seeing that every living thing is connected in some way" (Marati). Could these practices, therefore, not be re-interpreted as self-originating acts of ethics—as acts of personal authenticity that morally recognise the Other? (Taylor)?

Taylor (1992) provides a useful approach to salvage values of authenticity from the despair of much cultural diagnosis. He (81) suggests that the ethical ideal of authenticity—wrapped in notions of self-discovery, self-fulfilment and personal improvement—now plays a central role in modern Western culture. Taylor (11) emphasises the moral possibilities of authenticity as an ethical ideal built on the principle of "being true to yourself" (Taylor 26). This is a moral mode that rests in the moral ideal of "being true to my own originality," which is "something only I can articulate" (Taylor 29).

Taylor (74) contends that "at its best" authenticity as a contemporary ideal "allows a richer model of existence." Rather than destroying it point-blank for its weaknesses, Taylor sets as his task to raise the bar of the ideal. He suggests that authenticity in this higher form calls upon people to adopt a self-responsible form of life that engenders people to be "true to themselves" within relations of responsibility to others. The key to achieving this is a tempered version of authenticity that acknowledges its "constitutive tensions" (Taylor 71). This is a reconstructed ideal that balances the creative, original and non-conformist dimensions of authenticity—the artistic aspects—with external signifiers or points of reference outside the self.

What Taylor is doing here is putting some checks and balances around authenticity as a notion of unfettered self-determining freedom. He does this by underlining the significance of the self in relation to what he calls "horizons of significance." For Taylor, it is only through "horizons of significance"—for example, history, nature, charity, citizenship and God—that we come to know and recognise ourselves in meaningful ways (45–48; 68). Taylor highlights here the importance of a social self where the individual choosing/feeling self is absurd taken in isolation from others (36).

Like the poet, the musician or the artist, moral creation is personal and intensely subjective but it is still connected to a social self. For example, vegetarianism or yoga may involve the development of an authentic relationship with the self through the cultivation of qualities of personal awareness, growth and self-care but they are also fundamentally about dialogical relations with others—with

animals, with nature, with a sense of social and cosmic connectedness. As Taylor asserts, personal sensibility finds significance in the construction of a world independent of self-choice and feeling (89). The value of Taylor is that he recovers authenticity and practices of self-improvement from the straight out negativity of decline theory but does not trivialise morality to a sort of unfettered self-determining and disencumbered freedom. This theoretical discussion provides a conceptual framework in which to investigate how everyday moralities are constructed and practiced in contemporary Australia.

Present Study

How do Australians understand and experience morality in their everyday lives? What role does authenticity play? What are the implications of this and what it does it mean for authenticity as a contemporary ethical ideal? To help answer these questions I now report the findings of a qualitative study I conducted into everyday Australian moralities. A small qualitative sample of bloggers is in no way representative of the population but provides some illustrative examples of the shape and influence of authenticity culture on moral life. The aim of the everyday moralities project was to "thickly describe" (Geertz) how individuals "write" and "talk" their everyday moral worlds into existence from their own perspectives. The first part of the study involved a qualitative analysis of 44 Australian blogs. Blogs offered an original empirical lens through which to investigate the contemporary production of morality and selfhood in late-modernity. The blogs were selected as a form of personal life record (Thomas and Znaniecki 1833) that allowed access to spontaneous accounts of everyday life that reflected what was important to the blogger without the intervention of a researcher (Hookway, *Entering*). The blogs were sampled from the blog hosting Website [LiveJournal](#) (LJ). Blogs were selected that contained at least two incidents, moments, descriptions or experiences that shed light on the blogger's everyday moral constructions and practices. The second part of the study inviting sampled bloggers to participate in an online interview to further develop themes expressed in their blog posts. This resulted in 25 online interviews, which were conducted via various instant-messaging programs.

"Being True to Yourself": Authenticity as Moral Value?

Meet Queen_Extremist, a 26 year-old female university student from Melbourne and president of the university student association. While writing that her life is "all in a spin", Queen_Extremist says she "likes who I am, I like the way I do things, I'm proud of what I've achieved. I stayed true to myself". Although Queen_Extremist may position herself as someone who is "not sure what [her] beliefs are based on, or whether they are worthwhile", she "knows who she is". And while potentially conflicted about whether "the concept of staying true to one's self is arrogant and selfish", "being true to yourself" according

to what "feels right" is positioned as a sort of royal road to the construction of everyday rightness. She writes:

I know what I feel. I know when something feels wrong to me. I know when something feels right. And I know that it feels terrible when I do something that feels wrong. It's not logical. It's not rational. I don't know if it's the right thing to do or if it's selfish or arrogant. But I don't like being something I'm not. I don't like being false or changing my personality for others. I'm really happy with who I am. If something contrary to that is required, I suggest that someone other than me is requested to do it.

Queen_Extremist offers a clear articulation of the everyday guiding power of authenticity. This type of morality is rooted in an obligation to realise an authentic selfhood found in a feeling-based sense of right and wrong. One "looks within" to the subjective and authentic world of the feeling and true self to determine "right" and "wrong." The source of "who I am" is found within the inner world of "true feelings". So while Queen_Extremist may feel that she does not "know much about anything" she is confident in her knowledge of who she truly is and what she truly feels. This is an ethical knowledge that she can explicitly trust. The trick for Queen_Extremist's practice of an "ethics of authenticity" is discovering who you are and sticking to it.

Universal_cloak, Squash_pippa and Snifflethebouncer all advance a similar moral strategy that highlights the power of "being true to yourself". 32-year-old Universal_cloak, an artistic designer from Melbourne, writes on her blog of the importance of "being true to yourself" and its helping role in "making moral choices about who I am and what I stand for":

Being true to yourself is one of the most important things you can nurture in life ... I think it's important to live your life in a way that reflects who you are. If you lead a false life you will sooner or later run into problems because you're ignoring huge parts of yourself that require attention (interview).

Universal_cloak believes that "it's morally wrong to avoid, ignore or otherwise mistreat yourself". Inverting "do unto others", she writes, "if you wouldn't do it to other people, don't do it to yourself". She reasons that to not be "who you are" is inherently self-destructive: "I have known people who have ignored who they are, and as a result have sort of 'soured themselves'". For Universal_cloak, a corollary of "souring" the self is "souring" relations to others: "in turn, they build up this sourness and it reflects in their life, making them sour toward other people". For Universal_cloak, authenticity not only governs the relation of self upon self but also involves relations of care with others; the personal search for authenticity is connected to how one treats and relates to other people.

Similarly, Snifflethebouncer, a 22-year old PhD student from Sydney, writes "one of the things that matters most to me, with morality, is that you feel genuine about what

you're doing". Feeling emerges here as a strategy to validate a "genuine" or "authentic" morality:

You feel in your heart that it's the right thing. If you feel one thing and do something else, then you're not being true to yourself. If I feel one thing is the right thing to do, but I do something else (to benefit myself, most probably), then I'll feel bad about it, and I'll feel I haven't followed my morals.

Squash_pippa, a 32-year-old female community worker from Sydney, elaborates the significance of "being true to yourself" as a code of action by describing a story about someone who "invented themselves to be someone that they're not" and how this had caused her to feel inferior, to even "hate" herself "for not being as good as what they were". She explains, claiming to now see the "situation objectively", that this person had actually lied about "who they were" by "making themselves out to be so good". They had violated the ideal of being the "real" and "authentic" you. For Squash_pippa this meant they were actually a "lesser person" as they were not prepared to accept the reality of "who they really are". This notion of being authentic to the self (Taylor) is something Squash_pippa says she has always committed to. She is "who I am" and "never compromises what 'feels' right":

I am who I am and people can either like me or hate me, either way I'm not too fussy just as long as I never have to go against the morals and values I have and never compromise what 'feels' right ... We all have our faults and they're not always easy to accept but it takes a stronger person to accept who they really are than the one who lies and makes themselves to be someone who they're not.

Queen_Extremist, Universal_cloak, Squash_pippa and Snifflethebouncer evoke a type of "ethics of authenticity", where the notion of "being true to yourself" is sourced from the "romantic solace" of moral feeling. In these accounts, there is only one true or authentic self—the rest are imposters that lead to falseness and the problems of inauthenticity, fakery and phoniness—the contemporary sins of an "age of authenticity".

Being true to self is developed in these accounts as a life-principle that suggests we all have a unique and original way of being moral *within* us that needs to be realised and fulfilled. For these bloggers, the primary moral task is to search and reveal the "authentic" self, the real and truthful self that lurks within. While "being true to yourself" operates as a powerful framework of belief in these blog accounts, it does not meet Taylor's criteria of authenticity in its "higher form." Authenticity is mobilised in its more "narcissistic" form, where moral talk is never linked to something external to the self. For example, Queen_Extremist knows who she is and does not want to be something she is not. Likewise, Universal_Cloak believes in living life "in a way that reflects who you are". These are highly subjectivist accounts of morality which not only ignore the social basis of morality but also present morality as unilateral and deaf rather than

something that is responsive to people's suffering or flourishing (Sayer). Authenticity—using Taylor's language—is presented in an impoverished form where ideals of action never reside outside the self and thus fail to invoke a better or higher form of life worth searching and striving for (Taylor 61). In many ways, we end up with evidence that support declinist accounts of authenticity discourses as self-centred, introverted and amoral.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the importance of authenticity as a contemporary cultural and moral value. In the first part, I showed how authenticity and cultures of self-fulfilment have been negatively theorised by the "cultural pessimists." Using the work of Taylor, I went on to argue that authenticity, particularly the ethical principle of "being true to yourself" can be retrieved from the pessimism of thinkers like Rieff, Lasch, Bell, Bauman and Donskis. I argue that Taylor is particularly important in how he recognises the value of authenticity in terms of its creative and artistic dimensions but also the external "horizons of significance" that give it substance, life and meaning.

The second part of the paper moved to an empirical analysis of how authenticity was mobilized by a selection of Australian bloggers. For these individuals, to be authentic means *not* "being something I'm not" (Queen_Extremist); *not* leading a false life" (Universal_cloak); and *not* "inventing" yourself "as someone else". Like reality television contestants, their task is to sort the real from the fake, from those "playing the game" and those being themselves—to work out who's being "real" and who's not. Why authenticity is clearly a powerful guide for this group of bloggers, their accounts do seem to partly support the pessimists' charge of narcissism. Ideas of authenticity are presented as coming purely from inside the self without reference to external "horizons of significance." This leaves us with an anemic form of authenticity that ignores the social basis of self, authenticity and morality (Taylor).

"Being true to yourself" is a moral strategy that invokes a modernist assumption of a stable and unitary model of self. It is a version of self that appears distinctly "non-liquid" (Bauman). There are, for example, no "multiple" or "fragmented" selves in the blog accounts of Queen_Extremist, Universal_cloak and Snifflethebouncer but only "true" and "false" "personalities"; "real", "false" or "invented selves". As Universal_cloak says, being "true to yourself" means "to live your life in a way that reflects who you are" (Universal_cloak). In this way the bloggers appear to not only miss the socially-shaped character of the moral self but also the *aboutness* of morality—how morality is about people's well-being, suffering and flourishing rather than simply the authority of the subject (Sayer).

Two key research agendas emerge from these findings. First, further research is needed to empirically investigate

wider practices of authenticity and morality beyond internet populations and to examine the extent and shape of narcissism. Second, there are fruitful lines of inquiry in investigating the dynamics of "being true to yourself" in a "liquid" age supposedly defined by identity reinvention and instant transformation (Elliott and Lemert). Does the pursuit of an authentic ethical self represent a form of resistance to identity fluidity and reinvention or could it actually feed the short-termism of a "no strings attached" world, where the search for "true" or "authentic" selves promote a culture of "moving on" and weak social bonds (Bauman and Donskis 14)?

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