In Praise of Inauthenticity

Manu Bazzano

Published in Hermeneutic Circular
Newsletter of the Society of Existential Analysis October 2013 pp 27-30

What is Authenticity?
In spite of its declared bias for the therapeutic relationship and the dialogical domain, the notion of authenticity prevalent today in existential and humanistic modalities of psychotherapy inevitably focuses on the individual. It is after all the individual who is said to be authentic/inauthentic, having opted for one of two narrowly-posited alternatives between the only two modalities of Dasein.

An authentic life – so goes the popular refrain – implies an unwavering resolution to live one’s life in the awareness of finitude, of its being-towards-death, whereas an inauthentic life presupposes denial of finitude and the refusal to recognise the reality of death. Only a mode of living able to embrace reality – the refrain goes on – can be called authentic. And only by living authentically as an individual (by ‘being real’), I may adequately respond to my being ‘thrown’ into this world.

The notion summarily sketched above contains three fundamental flaws:

a) It presents a two-dimensional picture of the human predicament, dualistically dominated by the modes of authenticity/inauthenticity.

b) It represents an ontological rather than dialectical method of investigation entirely devoid of historical consciousness.
c) It is an *individualistic* (and elitist) depiction of human agency, delegating the latter to the capabilities of a creative and superior individual – the philosopher, the poet, the head of state – who alone can be authentic and produce effective change in history.

Let us now look a little more closely at each of these flaws.

**a) A Two-dimensional View**

The binomial cluster *authentic/inauthentic* reflects similarly narrow dualisms found in Heidegger: ontological/ontic, science/philosophy, *Vorhandenheit/Zuhandenheit* (givenness/instrumentality) and so forth. One could argue that such generalizations are helpful in navigating the complexities of the human condition, but this is not the case here: this is not Newtonian parsimony (useful, when applied non-dogmatically, in navigating the complex causes of human behaviour), but quasi-theological over-simplification. Conspicuously absent from this rather simplistic view of the world are all historical and social differences, “variations of consciousness” (Goldmann, 1977, p. 13), as well as specificities of culture, gender, and ethnicity.

As we shall see, the very notion of inauthenticity, when seen through a different prism (ie that of concrete historicity), it escapes this limited understanding in favour of a view that translates it as *alienation*, in turn a product of reification and of the emergence of a new dominant class.

**b) Ontological vs. Dialectical**

There are several modalities of investigation within existential therapy, most of them plotting a course between two polarities: *ontological* and *dialectical*. I would like to suggest
that approaches to existential psychotherapy mainly draw from either an ontological or a dialectical matrix.

The ontological matrix (largely inspired by Heidegger and only partly by Husserl’s early work) enjoys greater popularity in the ‘UK school’ of existential therapy. The dialectical matrix is equally present yet marginal; it draws (indirectly) on Hegel via a host of influential thinkers including Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and de Beauvoir.

Husserl’s example is more complex and I will not discuss it here but only say this: a stark demarcation needs to be made between his earlier and later work: one only needs to consider Husserl’s early version of epoché (first, to regard phenomena as the intentional objects of consciousness; second, to move from instances to essences; third, to see essences as necessary rather than contingent) (Bazzano, 2013) – and compare it with his more nuanced formulation of the same notion in his later years. In this later version essences are put back into existence – a move which, although nowhere near the dialectical method (concrete historicity being thoroughly absent in Husserl), opens up a fruitful avenue for Merleau-Ponty’s exploration. Husserl’s later work perhaps indirectly sawed the seeds for a phenomenological exploration that was to move away from the ontological mode and towards a dialectical perspective. This was persuasively achieved in the work of Sartre, de Beauvoir and especially Merleau-Ponty, all of whom attended (and were significantly influenced by) the Parisian lectures of Kojève (1969) and Hyppolite (1969) on Hegel.

The dialectical method of investigation is steeped in concrete historicity – in Hegel’s blood, sweat and tears of real historical events, or in Adorno’s reading of ‘thrownness’ as “fear of unemployment, lurking in all citizens of countries of high capitalism” (Adorno, 1973, p 34). This is different from the Heideggerian notion of historicity, a “bad abstract” rather than “a conceptual vehicle to comprehend ... real concreteness” (Marcuse, 1974, p 156). A
dialectical approach understands the human subject as *situated* (de Beauvoir, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 2000); it does not stoop to the arbitrary separation between ‘ontic’ and ‘ontological’ domains – between the attempted solution of everyday problems and conflicts and the supposedly higher purposes of Being – between (for instance) psychology and philosophy. Whereas the ontological perspective sees inauthenticity as a fall from grace, the dialectical view historicizes ‘inauthenticity’ as *alienation*, in turn a product of *reification*. The most lucid expression of this is found in Lukács (1972) for whom “the separation between subject and object ... appeared in a certain historical condition, with the development of the Western bourgeoisie and of the generalization of market production, with ... reification” (Goldmann, 1977, p 33). Although I would not go as far as Lucien Goldmann (1977), for whom Heideggerian inauthenticity was appropriated from Lukács’s notion of a colonised and alienated everyday (*Alltäglichkeit*), the bold comparison between the two philosophers’ view of inauthenticity provides food for thought. As I have written a while back:

Whereas Heidegger sees the everyday as falling short of the lofty authenticity of Being, Lukács perceives it as being *colonized* by the greed and mechanization of capitalism. Where Heidegger’s measure and criterion are [ontological], Lukács’s notion is steeped in ethics, social justice, and the redemptive function of art. (Bazzano, 2011)

A dialectical perspective acknowledges (without endorsing it) the inescapable separation between subject and object. It goes one step further, beyond mere contemplation and towards active transformation. Without a dialectical relation of subject and object, as Lukács reminds us,

“Dialectics ceases to be revolutionary. For it implies a failure to recognize that in all metaphysics the object remains untouched and unaltered so that
thought remains contemplative adn fails to become practical; while for the
dialectical method the central problem is to change reality” (Lukács, 1968, pp
xlvi-xlvii)

c) Individualism

What makes the world go round? Or, in more philosophical terms: who is the real agent of
historical action? Is it the individual (poet, philosopher, scientist, politician), the ‘shepherd of
Being’ – one who, having gone beyond the common escapism and infantilism of das Man,
has reached a certain degree of authenticity? Or could the real agent of history be a plural
subject? The second scenario presents us with a subject becoming increasingly aware of
itself – hence is both subject and object (Lukács, 1972). Whereas the Heideggerian authentic
individual is chained to ipseity, i.e. sees herself as consistently equal to herself, holding “the
superstitious belief in the self as an entity identical to itself” (Bazzano, 2012, p 12) – and this
in spite of having allegedly apprehended her embeddedness in the world – the plural subject
is fluid and comes into existence as response to an event. Example: who could have
predicted the emergence of the Occupy movement in response to widespread corporate
greed?

The path of the client undergoing ontological existential therapy is potentially a rather
narrow affair: it travels from inauthenticity to authenticity. Not a small feat, some might say.
Yet the journey happens within the four walls of ipseity, of a self identical to itself.
Moreover, any therapeutic methodology motivated by the desire to unveil through so-called
aletheia anything such as ‘truth’, ‘being’, pre-existing substance, essence or client’s true self
(or optimistically aspiring to decode a particular constellation/dilemma/situation the client
struggles with) will be altogether different from a more exacting
phenomenological/empirical methodology, i.e. observant of what the contemporary
Brazilian phenomenological psychotherapist Virginia Moreira, echoing Merleau-Ponty, aptly calls “emergent phenomenon” (2012, p. 52). As argued by Moreira (2012), it is precisely by “keeping the person in the center that the psychotherapeutic process stagnates” (ibid.).

Whereas ontological existential therapy relies on an abstract notion of being, dialectical existential therapy labours (and plays) under the matrix of becoming. The former is subjugated to Heidegger’s essentially Kantian idealism, demoting phenomena to mere propadeutic to metaphysics and reducing the rich art of phenomenology to a preliminary drill before the ‘mighty unveiling’ of being. For Kant the study of phenomena was subservient to the existence of noumena or pure concepts, and Heidegger essentially replicated this move. More importantly, the stolid, traditional notion of individuality which the notion of Dasein had vainly promised to unfasten is alive and well in ontological existential therapy. “This entity in its very Being” – Heidegger says in relation to Dasein – “is in each case mine” (Heidegger, 1967, p. 113, my emphasis).

A dialectical form of existential therapy will instead be alert to non-idealistic developments within phenomenology, ie the ones that acknowledge, via Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir, Hegel’s fundamental lessons of concrete historicity. It will be more attuned to the emergent phenomenon rather than fixated on an ill-conceived notion of individuality, the authentic individual and the abstraction of ‘being’.

**What is Inauthenticity?**

*Who knows what the ostrich sees in the sand?* (Samuel Beckett, Murphy)

One thing ‘they’ (das Man), those inauthentic individuals out there are said to be doing is idle chatter (Gerede). Let us bracket for a moment the decisive fact that, as Adorno (1973) remarks, Heidegger “condemns idle chatter, but not brutality, the alliance with which is the
true guilt of chatter, which is in itself far more innocent” (p. 102), and look instead at the implications for clinical work. A client who lapses into long spells of chit-chat during a session is said to be avoiding the real issues, diverting from the welling up of painful emotions or meaningful topics, resisting therapy and so forth. I have taken the above view as existential Gospel. Until, that is, my work with ‘Isabelle’, a woman in her late twenties. Born in Scotland from Sicilian parents, she came to therapy with the desire to ‘navigate more successfully’ the intensity of her emotions. Whether grief or euphoria, she had often felt they would ‘take over’, make her life ‘unmanageable’. A year into therapy she told me, with tears in her eyes, of the death of her grandfather, whom she had been very close to. She described in vivid and moving detail episodes from her childhood. Her granddad had been for long spells like a parent to her. Her death was also the end of an era. It coincided with major changes in her life and represented in many ways the death of the old life.

Our exchange reached a deep level of feeling. I felt tears welling up in me: I know they were my tears as well as hers; I was absorbing her sorrow but also being stirred by sudden recollections. This lasted for some ten, fifteen minutes, after which she unexpectedly changed the subject and started to talk about a present she had bought for her cousin’s birthday, about her cousin lovely one-year old girl, and about an ambivalent remark made by a colleague at work. I thought she was avoiding, not wanting to feel the intensity of her grief. Nevertheless I went along with it: I listened, nodded, kept silent and attentive. She did eventually come back to talk of her sadness, yet I was still a little puzzled. What later emerged in supervision was a surprise. We both wondered, my supervisor and I, whether her chit-chat was perhaps a natural way to regulate her affects. I recognized something parallel in my own upbringing. Like Isabelle, I also grew up in a culture where grief is not only expressed and encouraged but also considered somewhat as duty. This can contribute to
bereavement reaching a paroxysm where the pain is unbearable. The organism collapses, or, more often shuts down and becomes numb. And the numbness then can extend to other areas of the person’s life. This is when ‘idle talk’, the alleged superficiality of talking about recipes and clothes and the weather, provides one with a healthy counterpoint to paralyzing pain and hopelessness. This is only the first of several examples encountered in my clinical work when ‘inauthenticity’ saves the person from drowning.

**Naturally Inauthentic**

We have seen how an understanding of inauthenticity from a dialectical perspective contextualizes it as historical alienation, as the by-product of the commodification and colonization of everyday life operated by late capitalism (Lukács, 1968, Lefebvre, 1991; Debord, 1973; Goldmann, 1977; Bazzano, 2012).

There is another perspective of inauthenticity, recently advocated by various writers (Critchley, 2008; Bazzano, 2012) who speak of *original inauthenticity*. This notion draws on the work of anthropological philosopher Helmut Plessner, for whom “the human position” is seen as inherently “eccentric” (Plessner, 1970, p 36).

For Plessner, human beings find themselves in an *eccentric* position. We do not coincide with ourselves but inhabit a gap between a physical and a psychological dimension. Embedded in the animal kingdom, we have deliberately placed ourselves outside it via an act of *Abgehobenheit*, or apartness. In this peculiarly human situation of “mediated immediacy”, the human being experiences herself *as* and *within* a thing, a thing differentiating itself from all other things because she is herself that thing. She finds herself sustained and surrounded by something that keeps resisting her. To fully recognize this condition liberates us from the obligation to tag along the latest epistemologies and invites
us to accept the ambivalence between presence and apartness, proximity and remoteness, objectivity and subjectivity.

In order to be able to say ‘I’, a human being needs to withdraw somewhat from the body and the world. In such temporary withdrawal (Abgehobenheit) from physical existence the world is presented to her as a mediated immediacy, a strange limbo between transcendence and immanence, between being-in-the-world and being a cogito, between “closure from or openness to what there is.

**Psychotherapy, the Secret & the Knight of Good Conscience**

The reader may have gathered from the necessarily brief discussion above that an idealized (or, equally, a quasi-metaphysical) notion of authenticity does not do justice to the multiplicity, complexity and the sheer eccentricity of the human position. There is one more aspect I would like to sketch here, relating to the Derridean notion of the secret (Derrida, 1989, 1989a, 1995). First though, please consider the following two questions, the first in relation to the private, the second to the civic dimension:

a) What is the relation between authenticity and absolute transparency? (Or: does authenticity imply a life of openness and transparency?)

b) Does a desirable idea of democracy imply complete transparency or would it be rather defined by the right of the individual to protect her secret?

Let’s say one holds that authenticity implies transparency. Could this mean that I am clinging to a ‘Garden of Eden’ notion of first principles, to a state of being that, (once inauthenticity, conditionings and so forth are dealt with) will be revealed (aletheia, again) in all its pristine innocence? Or could it be instead that the ‘origin’ is already divided, already tainted? Could it be that fall from authenticity is our human intrinsic dimension? Derrida, a
formidable interpreter of Heidegger, calls this possibility ‘origin-heterogeneous’ (Derrida, 1989). If so, every experience contains an element of lateness. I am always late for the origin. For Hamlet, time is always ‘out of joint’. For Plessner, we never ever coincide with ourselves.

The right of an individual to maintain a secret acquires, in this light, a twofold meaning, the first psychological, the second political. First of all, keeping a secret implies auto-affection: in order to truly have a secret, I must tell it to myself. I speak of the secret to myself. I am bound to singularity rather than generality. Secondly, keeping a secret preserves oikonomía, the law of the private, intimately linked to the domain of the sacred, against a panoptical and absolutist ‘transparency’, the perverse democracy of CCTV where even Pascal’s ‘hidden God’ is filmed, before being subjected to evidence-based ‘research’.

A claim to authenticity would be as anachronistic (as well as arrogant and smug) today as the claim that one truly embodies the Kierkegaard’ ‘Knight of Faith’, when all one can be at the most in our current climate is what Derrida (1995) aptly calls a ‘Knight of Good Conscience’. He develops this notion in The Gift of Death, his luminous commentary on Kierkegaard and on the Christian Check philosopher Patočka, who had been a pupil of Husserl and Heidegger. Incidentally, Patočka had been part of ‘Charter 77’ a democratic group of intellectuals which included the dramatist and future president Václav Havel. The philosopher was arrested and imprisoned by the authorities. He died in prison, after a brutal interrogation. No such dangers loom for the Knight of Good Conscience. Having pushed aside passionate commitment, sense of vocation and the last shreds of courage in favour of a bland obedience to generalities – a key word in The Gift of Death as well as in Derrida’s The Postcard (Derrida, 1980), all a Knight of good conscience can do is ticking the box of this
or that ‘code of practice’, in the name of ‘ethics’ – often a byword for good conscience and conformity.

A claim to authenticity sounds at best ironic in the way in which the existential paradigm is current taught in various institutions. Lecturers and tutors who like me have marked hundreds of essays recycling the usual clichés about authenticity in therapy (or, in person-centred training, the equally tiresome formula of ‘relational depth’) will know what I mean.

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Come to discuss and develop these ideas further on **Tuesday 19 November 2013, 7pm** at the Society of Psychotherapy, 254 Belsize Rd London NW6 4BT, where Manu will give a talk on Inauthenticity.


www.manubazzano.com

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