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Authenticity, Autonomy and Multiculturalism

Edited by
Geoffrey Brahm Levey

"In this extraordinarily rich collection of essays, Levey and colleagues examine the complex relationships in political theory and public policy between autonomy and authenticity, on the one hand, and liberalism and cultural rights, on the other. Of particular importance are the critical reflections throughout the volume on the costs and pay-offs of ideas of authenticity in confronting real-world dilemmas."

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"This book is an important contribution to a topic that is of urgent significance. It brings together the leading authors on the topic who discuss the key theoretical and practical issues that are relevant in increasingly multicultural liberal democracies."

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Authenticity, Autonomy and Multiculturalism

The concept of "authenticity" enters multicultural politics in three distinct but interrelated senses: as an ideal of individual and group identity that commands recognition by others; as a condition of individuals' autonomy that bestows legitimacy on their values, beliefs and preferences as being their own; and as a form of cultural pedigree that bestows legitimacy on particular beliefs and practices (commonly called "cultural authenticity"). In each case, the authenticity idea is called on to anchor or legitimate claims to some kind of public recognition. The considerable work asked of this concept raises a number of vital questions: Should "authenticity" be accorded the importance it holds in multicultural politics? Do its pitfalls outweigh its utility? Is the notion of "authenticity" avoidable in making sense of and evaluating cultural claims? Or does it, perhaps, need to be rethought or recalibrated?

Geoffrey Brahm Levey and his distinguished group of philosophers, political theorists, and anthropologists challenge conventional assumptions about "authenticity" that inform liberal responses to minority cultural claims in modern Western democracies. Discussing a wide range of cases drawn from Britain and continental Europe, North America, Australia and the Middle East, they press beyond theories to consider also the practical and policy implications at stake. The book will be a helpful resource for scholars worldwide in Political and Social Theory, Political Philosophy, Legal Anthropology, Multiculturalism, and, more generally, of cultural identity and diversity in liberal democracies today.

Geoffrey Brahm Levey is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow and Associate Professor in Political Science at the University of New South Wales, Sydney.

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Authenticity, Autonomy and Multiculturalism

Geoffrey Brahm Levey

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Geoffrey Brahm Levey
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1 Authenticity and the multiculturalism debates

Geoffrey Brahm Levey

Multiculturalism became globally controversial in the twenty-first century. Much of this disquiet relates to the presence or anticipation of Muslim immigrants in the community, the salience of religious identity in the public sphere, and public fears aroused by Islamic militancy. Yet controversy has always stalked multiculturalism. Ever since its introduction as a public philosophy and policy for responding to cultural diversity in Canada and Australia in the 1970s, and subsequently in other liberal democracies, there has been a perception that multiculturalism undermines social cohesion and national identity. Other long-standing criticisms are that it places the interests of groups over those of the individual, and that it invites trouble by raising questions about who counts as a group member and what constitutes a genuine cultural practice for the purposes of political recognition.

At the heart of these concerns are the modern values of autonomy and authenticity. In his seminal essay "The Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor (1992) identifies these two ideals as the source of the dilemmas over identity politics in the West (see also ibid. 1991). Autonomy highlights capacities that individuals ideally have in common, such as rational self-direction and charting one's own course in life. Respect for these capacities, says Taylor, promotes a "politics of universalism" that emphasizes the equal dignity of citizens. Authenticity, on the other hand, stresses the uniqueness of individuals' or groups' identities. While it is also universal in the sense that all may lay claim to it, authenticity, according to Taylor, produces a "politics of difference" in which recognition of one's own identity is sought precisely because it is one's own. Taylor (ibid.: 39) notes how the "politics of difference grows organically out of the politics of universal dignity." However, he argues that contemporary democracies find identity politics so vexatious because these two animating modern values have pressed in opposite directions. Whereas autonomy has been taken to connote procedural liberalism, equal rights based on common citizenship, and the "difference-blind" state, authenticity recommends differentiated citizenship, cultural rights, and the multiculturalist state.

Taylor's account of the profound ramifications of the values of autonomy and authenticity is pitched abstractly. It is intended to capture general

propensities of these values in modern culture and politics. Unsurprisingly, the import of and relation between these values is more complicated when they are considered less sweepingly.

By the late 1980s arguments were being made that respect for individual autonomy justifies cultural recognition and various cultural rights (Kymlicka 1989; Tamir 1993; Habermas 1994). Indeed, it is arguable that autonomy is now more often invoked to defend cultural recognition than it is to defend liberal neutrality and the "difference-blind" state, as had traditionally been the case.[1] This wrinkle does not necessarily refute Taylor's contrast between the political implications of autonomy and authenticity. Most autonomy-based defenses of cultural recognition, after all, stem from certain received ideas about what autonomy entails and entertain cultural recognition only insofar as these elements are respected. Their primary commitment, in other words, is to liberal values and justice rather than to identity and its esteemed recognition.[2] Still, some scholars bridge the two sides. Axel Honneth, for example, defends the importance of recognition for an individual's well-being and self-esteem in similar terms to those of Taylor. He too contends that nonrecognition or misrecognition causes people real psychological harm. Yet Honneth views appropriate social recognition as an essential condition of individual autonomy rather than as the corollary of authenticity (Honneth 1996; Anderson and Honneth 2005).

A further complication is that the concept of authenticity itself figures centrally in the understanding of autonomy. The autonomous person determines her own life on the basis of motivations, beliefs and values that are her own. Many liberals thus look beyond individuals' stated preferences to consider also the forming of their preferences. They want to be sure that individuals' preferences haven't been unduly influenced by distorting conditions external to them, such as coercive threats, misinformation, manipulation and deceit, and moral and emotional blackmail and the like. Some cast the net even wider to include systemic and structural distortions in society, such as relations of domination and dependence or, as just noted, misrecognition or the absence of sufficient care, nurturance or love. These attempts to establish individuals' "true selves," free of distortion, implicitly and often explicitly appeal to the idea of authenticity as an integral condition of autonomous agency. When people worry, for example, that Muslim girls or women who wear the hijab, niqab or burqa do so either as a result of intimidation from the males in their family or because they have internalized the oppressive norms of their faith community, it is the authenticity of their preferences they are worrying about.

The concept of authenticity also goes to the question of the legitimate expression of a particular culture. That is, in many real-world cases it is not enough that individuals or groups have unique or distinctive identities to warrant their recognition, as Taylor would have it. Rather, their expression of these identities through beliefs and practices must also be shown to be "culturally authentic." This condition is usually taken to mean conforming

to historically original or traditional cultural expressions or otherwise displaying historical continuity. Hence, the US Supreme Court agreed that the Old Order Amish could withdraw their children after a few years of general schooling, having established the longevity and rigor of their traditional culture.[3] Hence, too, the Quebec Court of Appeals determined that the Cree Indians were no longer "Cree," and therefore were not entitled to protection of their fishing and hunting lands, after it was shown that some group members engaged in mainstream activities, such as eating Kentucky Fried Chicken.[4]

"Authenticity" enters multicultural politics, then, in three quite distinct and (as we shall see) complexly interrelated ways. First, in Taylor's sense of value being bestowed directly on individual and group identity such that these command recognition by others, which I will call the *authenticity of identity*. Second, it arises as a condition of individuals' autonomy that bestows legitimacy on their values, beliefs and preferences as being their own, which I will call the *authenticity of preferences*.[5] Third, authenticity is invoked as a form of cultural pedigree that bestows legitimacy on particular beliefs and practices, which is commonly called *cultural authenticity*. In each case, the authenticity idea is called on to anchor or legitimate claims to some kind of public recognition. The considerable work asked of this concept raises a number of vital questions: Should "authenticity" be accorded the importance it holds in multicultural politics? Do its pitfalls outweigh its utility? Does the authenticity ideal sustain the entitlement to political recognition and accommodation claimed in its name? Is the notion of "authenticity" avoidable in making sense of and evaluating cultural claims? Or does it, perhaps, need to be rethought or recalibrated?

This book pursues these and related questions. The contributors—who hail variously from the fields of political theory, philosophy, anthropology and law—do not uniformly agree in either their approaches or in their answers to them. Some argue for abandoning the idea of authenticity, some for questioning its primacy, some for refining its meaning, and some for pluralizing its compass. All, however, agree that the influence of "authenticity" on thinking about identity, autonomy and culture is significant and in need of serious reevaluation. Taken together, the Chapters included in this volume cast a cool eye over the uses to which the idea of authenticity has been put in multicultural politics and suggest alternative ways of proceeding, both conceptually and in practice.

For the remainder of this Chapter I will contextualize some of the issues surrounding the "three authenticities"—"identity," "preference" and "cultural"—and indicate how they relate to the Chapters and arguments that follow.

Identity authenticity

Authenticity is a modern ideal. According to Taylor (1991: 26), it is part of the "massive subjective turn of modern culture" that took shape in the

eighteenth century (notably articulated by Rousseau, Herder and Kant), "in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths." Autonomy is part of the same inward turn, which raises a question about their connection.

Taylor presents autonomy as grounding human dignity in the capacity of individuals to determine for themselves "a view of the good life" and how they wish to live their lives. He characterizes authenticity as an individual's or a group's "unique identity," whereby being true to oneself means being true to one's distinctness and originality (Taylor 1992: 57, 38, 1991: 28–29). Clearly, these two ethics may coincide—one's view of the good life might well amount to expressing one's original identity (Cooke 1997). They also play supporting roles to each other. I have already noted how the concept of authenticity is drawn on in accounts of autonomous agency (which will be pursued in the next section). By the same token, autonomy services authenticity in allowing the individual to arrive at her identity.

A key question is whether identity is chosen or whether it is received and therefore developed mainly through self-discovery. Students of authenticity are divided.

Lionel Trilling (1974) contrasted authenticity with the earlier modern ideal of sincerity. In his celebrated account, sincerity entails a self whose identity is given. Mastering one's identity is an act of self-discovery, and being true to one's self is to be true to this received identity. On this basis, the *sincere self* seeks congruence between its inner depths and its outer manifestations lest it appear false to others. Sincerity is thus exercised toward other people and "implies a public end in view" (ibid.: 9). In contrast, authenticity is a private or anti-public virtue. The *authentic self's* inner depths, for Trilling, have no fixed identity, which is chosen or created rather than discovered. It is uninterested in congruence between its inner depths and its outward manifestations, opposes convention and social conformity, and may bear an ironic attitude even to the identity it adopts (ibid.: 121; Evans 2003: 69). The artist is the example *par excellence* of authenticity for Trilling: "the artist seeks his personal authenticity in his entire autonomousness—his goal is to be as self-defining as the art-object he creates" (Trilling 1974: 100).

Taylor's account of authenticity is less individualistic. Although he acknowledges the originality of the authentic self, he stresses how human life has a dialogical character: "We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (ibid. 1992: 32–33). Dialogical relations are ongoing, and do not just pertain to the developmental stages of a personality, which can later be jettisoned. Even the work of a solitary artist, Taylor notes, is addressed to some viewer. On this account, an authentic identity cannot be "inwardly generated" in a literal or monological sense. Taylor (ibid.: 34) speaks of "discovering" one's own identity rather than creating or choosing it.

The dialogical point is an important corrective. It suggests why the pictures of the "simply inherited" self and the "totally created" self are equally misleading. Yet, in another sense, the dialogical point simply reproduces the

definitional quandary over authenticity in a more realistic context. Embedded in dialogical relations, is the authentic self the person who "tracks" these relations or who struggles to define her own identity, notwithstanding them? Surely, both paths are open to her. Even dialogically formed and dependent selves, as Mark Evans (2003: 70) notes, can be oppositional. It is also important to note that this process of self-definition need not be augmented by autonomy. The latter entails a rationally and critically self-reflective dimension. Such cool detachment is precisely what Romantic notions of authenticity repudiated in favor of the heart-felt and the spontaneous.

Ultimately, the "politics of recognition" argument does not hinge on whether an authentic identity is mainly self-discovered or relatively chosen. Rather, it is because of my or our unique identity, *however arrived at*, that political recognition is warranted. Before looking more closely at this claim to recognition, another set of relations requires clarification: that between identity, culture, and cultural membership. Dialogical relations—which Taylor (1989: 36) otherwise calls a "web of interlocution"—may be wide-ranging. They are not necessarily coterminous with a culture, let alone a particular cultural membership. The significance of culture for identity must therefore be considered in addition to the "dialogical point."

Taylor argues that cultures are intrinsically valuable. They are the *locus* of the goods valued by individuals, and so are not reducible to the value that individuals may singly place on the culture. The thesis is controversial. The example given is the survival of francophone culture in Quebec: "It is not just a matter of having the French language available for those who might choose it … it also involves making sure that there is a community of people here in the future that will want to avail itself of the opportunity to use the French language" (1992: 58). Perhaps, but then people individually and collectively now and in the future will have a beneficial interest in this language and its perpetuation. Still, the proposition that cultures have intrinsic value is intelligible against some widespread practices. Consider, for example, how societies collect, restore and exhibit cultural artifacts and strive to tell the story of long-lost civilizations in museums, and much of this at public expense. Or how nations at war will take pains to avoid destroying their enemy's art galleries and significant architecture. Such behavior suggests how cultures and their contents may be viewed as achievements that are valuable for their own sake. However, even if this is right, it scarcely extends to a public duty to preserve every unique living culture.

Most liberal multiculturalists offer instrumental reasons for valuing culture. Cultures are said, for example, to provide their members with a "context of choice" (Kymlicka 1989, 1995), the "boundaries of the imaginable" (Margalit and Raz 1990), mutual recognition and a sense of "belonging" (Tamir 1993: 67), and that which "facilitates social relations" (Raz 1995: 178). They are also said to be important to people's well-being in grounding their identity and sustaining their self-respect and self-image, which is why it is one's own culture and not some other context of choice that arguably

warrants recognition. A standard objection is that these accounts are not instrumental enough. Whether a culture enhances the well-being of its members is a contingent matter. In some cases, cultures or specific traditions are arguably harmful to some members, for example, inflicting genital mutilation on their girls or, in Judaism, denying a woman the opportunity to remarry if her husband refuses to grant her a divorce. That cultures are a "mixed bag" combining good and not-so-good elements is surely true. However, this means only that cultures or their practices should not receive unqualified acceptance or support.

A more serious criticism is that liberal accounts ignore the way in which cultures actually operate. James Johnson (2000), for example, highlights how cultures are constructed and manipulated to serve certain members' interests, and how their putative "options" are themselves the products of strategic politics. In a similar vein, Anthony Appiah worries that collective identities set expectations regarding the way in which a proper member should behave. Several contributors to this book express similar concerns (see the Chapters by Phillips, Bader, Renteln and Foblets, and Friedman). Appiah (2005: 110) goes so far as to state that political recognition replaces one tyranny (society's negative image of a group) with another (the group's prescriptive image of itself). He faults Taylor for being too ready to accept the monological collective identities that are presented for public recognition (ibid.: 108). A related concern is that recognition freezes or ossifies particular cultural narratives that are historically dynamic, contested, and in flux.[6]

These criticisms pertain particularly to cultural authenticity (discussed in the third section) and to collective forms of identity authenticity. They do not apply so obviously to the identity authenticity of individuals. Following Herder, Taylor (1992: 31) insists that authenticity predicated on a unique identity applies both to individuals and to collectives. Both categories may have unique identities and may resist social conformity and cultural assimilation. However, they are not symmetrical. Collective identities cannot oppose convention and conformity entirely since any shared identity, however unique, depends on both of these things. The fact that cultures are internally contested and historically dynamic might seem, then, only to strengthen the case of individuals to gain recognition of their own cultural interpretations and commitments. Their cultural inventiveness and distinctiveness constitute the perfect antidote to vested and elite interests and could contribute to the dynamism of the culture.

Evans (2003) views the problem from the opposite angle, arguing that precisely because individual authenticity resists conventions and conformity, it is problematic as an ethical basis for supporting cultures, which, perforce, are shared and relatively stable. He suggests that Trilling's ethic of sincerity, with its fixed identity, is more conducive to multiculturalism. However, this suggestion overlooks the way in which many cultural practices may be individually claimed and accommodated. Exemptions from standing regulations or law are a case in point. For example, Avigail Eisenberg (Chapter 8)