

CHARLES GUIGNON



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CHARLES GUIGNON

On Being Authentic



LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004 by Routledge 11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada by Routledge 29 West 35th Street, New York,
NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis
or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to
<http://www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/>.”

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by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including
photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data Guignon, Charles B., 1944 On being
authentic/Charles Guignon.—1st ed. p. cm.—(Thinking in action) Includes bibliographical
references. 1. Authenticity (Philosophy) 2. Self-realization. I. Title. II. Series B105.A8G85 2004
128—dc22 2003027596

ISBN Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-415-26122-8 hbk

ISBN 0-415-26123-6 pbk

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Eight

Authenticity in Context

As we come to the end of our tour through different ways of thinking about authenticity, it is time to draw some conclusions about what we have found. The project of being authentic, as we have interpreted it, involves two main components. First, there is the task of pulling yourself back from your entanglements in social game-playing and going with the flow so that you can get in touch with your real, innermost self. This task requires intensive inward-turning, whether such self-inspection is called “introspection,” “self-reflection,” or “meditation.” The assumption underlying the first component of the project of being authentic is that there is a substantial self lying deep within each of us, a self with attributes that are both distinctively our own and profoundly important as guides for how we ought to live. The second component of the project of authenticity involves living in such a way that in all your actions you express the true self you discovered through the process of inward-turning. The assumption here is that there is something fundamentally false or dishonest about social life, and for that reason it is crucially important to know who you are and *be* the person you are in all you do.

Most of the last three chapters have been devoted to questioning the assumptions underlying the first component of the project of authenticity. Chapter 5 questioned the assumption that what lies within is necessarily something good and valuable, something worth accessing and expressing in our lives. Chapter 6 considered questions about whether it makes sense to assume that there is, lying within us, a substantial self that is distinguishable from the socially constituted self. And Chapter 7 suggested that the most we can find within ourselves is a mixed bag of psychological episodes and states that are for the most part transient and not particularly dependable as guides to what we ought to do. At the end of this process of critical reflection on the notion of the authentic inner self, it has come to appear that mucking around inside the mental container, far from leading us to a better, richer life, might be a path to confusion and despair.

One might object, however, that though these criticisms show some problems in the notion of authentic existence, they do not show adequate appreciation for the fact that there is obviously something *right* about the project of being authentic. In order to bring to light what I think is right about this ideal, I want to take a closer look at the second component of the ideal of authenticity, the injunction to “be yourself” or “be true to who you are” in what you do. What exactly does this mean? As I hope to show, it turns out to mean something quite different from what our Romantic heritage has led us to think it means.

In previous chapters we noted some of the risks involved in taking authenticity as a guiding ideal for one's life. There is the risk of slipping into a life so prone to self-absorption and compulsive self-surveillance that one becomes isolated from all but those who share this preoccupation. There is the danger of bull-headed adherence to feelings and beliefs whose sole justification is that one finds through introspection that one feels that way or happens to hold these beliefs. There is the risk of being so carried away by feelings and perceived needs that one turns to actions that are either foolish or monstrous. There is the risk of falling prey to self-help gurus and pop therapists who promise "simple" answers to complex questions under the guise of showing you how to express your own authentic needs. And there is the risk of wasting your time undertaking a project of self-discovery and self-fulfillment that may be hopelessly self-defeating, a recipe for failure and disappointment.

Given the dangers involved in the project of authenticity, we might ask why we suppose that authenticity is a good thing. Why should anyone even want to be authentic? The first temptation is to see this question as absurd, like asking, Why should anyone ever want to be happy? But unlike happiness, authenticity is not a condition that is obviously good in itself. Most people would agree, I think, that becoming and being authentic is an arduous process, and that authentic people are not necessarily the happiest people in the sense of having pleasurable feelings most of the time. The ideal of authenticity makes a very heavy demand on you, one that outweighs concerns about sustaining good feelings in all situations. To see this, imagine what you would do if a drug were invented that would provide you with nothing but pleasurable feelings for the rest of your life, but would make you a mindless slave to society's conventions. Would you be willing to take that drug for the rest of your life? If you even hesitate to say "yes," then you probably feel that there is (or might be) something worthwhile about being authentic that goes beyond whatever good feelings it might bring. The question now is: What is the up side of authenticity? What is its appeal?

I think that most of us are inclined to see authenticity as an ideal character trait or personal virtue that is necessary to living the best possible life for humans under modern circumstances. The philosopher Charles Taylor has clarified this idea in *The Ethics of Authenticity*. In earlier, premodern societies, Taylor points out, people as a rule found their identity through coming to understand their place within the context of society and the wider cosmic order. Finding one's place in such a context provided the individual with a sense of what is worth pursuing in life, and it gave people a basis for seeing what they ought to do and for assessing how they were doing. The familiar model for such a view is the old idea of "my station and its duties." As we saw in Chapter 2, for people in premodern societies the central concern was with *honor*, that is, with doing well in the performance of one's socially prescribed roles. It follows that, in such societies, the primary orientation of life was "outward" rather than inward: what mattered was how one was faring in the shared undertakings of communal life.

With the rise of the modern worldview, the older context for determining how one should act has been replaced with an outlook in which individual responsibility and the choice of careers has become fundamental. In the modern world, one finds one's path through life not by getting clear about the circumstances of one's birth or one's station in life, but through discovering the options that are available in the world, getting clear about one's own desires, interests and talents, and choosing a path in the light of one's

own deepest desires and needs. For this approach to life, what is important is not “doing what one does,” not going with the flow, but knowing what you want and having the ability to chart your own course. The central issue for modernity is *autonomy*, self-direction, being the captain of your own ship. What we hope to achieve in life is not honor as that was traditionally conceived, but rather the *dignity* that arises from being a bounded, masterful, autonomous self. For the modern outlook, your sense of self-worth is based on the dignity of being a self-directed, effective actor in the world.

The modern picture of agency shows us why authenticity seems to be such a central concern for living a good life. Being self-directed requires (1) knowing what you believe and feel and (2) honestly expressing those beliefs and feelings in what you do. For this purpose, it is less important *what* you believe and feel than *how* deep those feelings and beliefs are. The modern picture of the ideal person is a picture of an independent, self-directed individual whose actions clearly manifest what he or she really is. It is an image of a focused, effective agent interacting with others and participating in public affairs with a degree of clarity, courage and integrity normally lacking in inauthentic individuals.

What we need to notice in this way of characterizing authentic existence is that the role of authenticity as described here has at its core a motivation that is more social than it is personal. In the language of virtues, we might say that authenticity is assumed to be a virtue more concerned with the individual’s personal fulfillment, rather like temperance, than it is a social virtue comparable to fairness and decency. The conception of authenticity as a personal matter follows from Lionel Trilling’s distinction between sincerity and authenticity. Where the former is clearly a social concern, the latter is understood to be entirely a personal issue. That is why authenticity involves such a disparaging attitude toward the social circumstances of life: worrying about fitting in and being a well-adapted member of society is the definition of inauthenticity. A number of the thinkers we have discussed put a great deal of emphasis on the social dimension of authentic existence. This is especially true of Heidegger, Taylor and Bruner, but it is also true of Sartre and de Beauvoir. And, as we saw at the outset of this study, Oprah, Dr. Phil and other self-help writers always emphasize the importance of our relations to others. But the heart of most conceptions of authenticity tends to be the personal concern with achieving self-realization and personal fulfillment through getting in touch with one’s own inner self.

In this final chapter, I want to explore the idea that the problems running through the standard idea of authenticity result from thinking of it solely as a personal virtue. What I will propose is that we think of authenticity as being fundamentally and irreducibly a social virtue. What would authenticity as a social virtue look like?

In recent years, two especially insightful philosophers have tried to articulate a conception of authenticity (and its related ideal, integrity) as a social virtue. The first of these, the late Bernard Williams, presents an extremely subtle and thoughtful reflection on the notion of authenticity in a chapter entitled “From Sincerity to Authenticity” in his book, *Truth and Truthfulness*.¹ As the title of this chapter suggests, Williams starts out from Lionel Trilling’s *Sincerity and Authenticity*, and like Trilling, he makes Rousseau a pivotal figure in his story. As we saw earlier, Rousseau is committed to the belief that if he truthfully expresses what he feels at any moment, he is assured of being authentic in the sense of “being himself.” The crucial concern for Rousseau is being true to the inner self as it reveals itself and expressing it openly, with full candor, and without any

embellishing or editing. Through this sort of authentic self-manifestation Rousseau hopes to enable others to recognize him as he truly is: he is confident that sincere, spontaneous self-expression, based solely on what is immediately presented to the self in its inwardness, will make manifest his true motives and will thereby reveal his true self, the “whole person,” in a way that is coherent and steady.² The assumption is that even though such self-revelation reveals conflicting moods and passing feelings, in the end the true self, the underlying source for all avowals and inner states, will become manifest to others.

Williams’ criticism of Rousseau’s project of self-revelation begins by noting that what we express at any moment can only be an expression of what we are feeling or thinking at that moment. It is the nature of psychological events and states that they come and go. If Rousseau hopes to make manifest his true, enduring self, then, he will need to find a way to steady the flow of feelings, desires and identifications that parade by within him. How is such steadying achieved? It is often assumed that steadiness is achieved through a wholehearted identification with some core projects, traits of character or ideals. The picture here is of an intense resolution to steadfastly embrace some set of character traits as definitive of one’s self. But, as we have seen, Sartre points out that dramatic psychological occurrences of this sort are just psychological occurrences, ultimately as transient and prone to break down as any other mental episodes and states. So it seems that what steadies and stabilizes the inner life cannot itself be something within the inner life, any more than what holds the beads on a necklace together can itself be just another bead.

Williams’ answer to this question is that the steadiness of the inner life can be achieved only through our interactions with others within the social context in which we find ourselves. To back up this suggestion, he considers the case of a person whose declarations and expressions are all completely sincere, but whose mental constitution is so changeable that he or she has different beliefs and attitudes from one time to the next. If these beliefs and stances changed too often, Williams says, we would not be able to see them as beliefs and identifications at all. This is the case because attributing beliefs and attitudes to someone requires that we see them to be fairly steady. For this reason, our expressions of belief and attitude need to form a pattern for them to even *count* as avowals of belief or opinion. In the same way, if someone is too capricious and unpredictable, it becomes questionable whether they have a *self* to be “true to” at all.

It may be the case, of course, that there are people who as a matter of fact always feel and believe the same things. For them, the pattern characterizing their inner life and defining the self is unavoidably presented in their truthful expressions. But for most of us, the fact that we have dynamic mental constitutions makes it likely that our views and feelings are subject to change as we confront different situations. So the question arises again: How is the continuity and coherence of the self possible? How do our beliefs and attitudes come to have enough of a pattern for them to present themselves *as* the beliefs and attitudes of a self at all?

Williams’ answer to these questions is in agreement with the view of the dialogical self discussed in Chapter 6. According to Williams, the requisite steadiness and patterning in our beliefs and feelings are made possible by our social interactions. In the course of dealing with others, we are expected to have some degree of consistency in our avowals and expressions over time. What makes such consistency possible is a set of

social practices that more or less gently nudge people into being steady in the responses elicited by others and, eventually, by themselves. We can say that someone is “way out of line” because we live in a world where keeping people in line and making them responsible for keeping in line are givens. As we grow up into this shared world, we “learn to present ourselves to others, and consequently to ourselves, as people who have moderately steady outlooks or beliefs” (p. 192). Confronted with a novel sort of situation and asked what we believe or how we feel, we may simply blurt out some spontaneous response. But having given that response, social pressures lead us to either own up to it and hold to it in a steady way, or to retract it and align ourselves with some other response.

The important thing to see here is that being a self that holds beliefs and honestly expresses those beliefs is made possible not by our having direct access to our inner lives, but by the processes of socialization and cultivation that transform us from chaotic, childish bundles of transient response into mature adults with fairly well-formed, stable selves. The conclusion Williams draws is that “we must leave behind the assumption that we first and immediately have a transparent self-understanding,” and recognize that “we are all together in the social activity of mutually stabilizing our declarations and moods and impulses into becoming such things as beliefs and relatively steady attitudes” (p. 193).

Note that Williams is not simply restating the postmodern chestnut that our selves are socially constructed. He is fully aware that there is something there “inside us” both before and after society does its work. Instead, his claim is that what we call our *authentic self*, the self we access and express when we are being authentic, is at its deepest level something shaped and defined by society. Even introspection and truthfulness are made possible by social practices, as is our very idea of ourselves as individuals. The lesson is, Williams says, that “we need each other in order to be anybody” (p. 200). It is only through our social interactions that we become selves whose inner episodes are given enough steadiness and cohesiveness so that our relations to others can be built on cooperation and trust.

This picture of the social context of authenticity transforms our sense of what is involved in being authentic. Authenticity requires something more than making a decision to identify with something, where *what* we identify with is irrelevant so long as we do it with enough intensity and passion. Instead, we need to see that our identity-conferring identifications are drawn from, and are answerable to, the shared historical commitments and ideals that make up our communal life-world.³ What imparts authoritative force to our decisions and commitments is not the wholeheartedness of the commitment, important as that may be, but rather the authority of the cultural traditions and social practices that form the shared background of intelligibility for our beliefs, commitments, feelings and decisions. Seen from this point of view, becoming an authentic individual is not a matter of recoiling from society in order to find and express the inner self. What it involves is the ability to be a reflective individual who discerns what is genuinely worth pursuing within the social context in which he or she is situated.

In her essay, “Standing for Something,” Cheshire Calhoun examines a concept closely related to authenticity, the notion of integrity.⁴ The character ideal of integrity is commonly understood as involving an ability to form an integrated self through wholehearted commitments, that is, through standing for something. Having firm and

enduring commitments of this sort is supposed to shape a person's character and thereby provide the person with a stable identity. Having such a character and identity, it is assumed, is what is needed to be able to genuinely believe in something and so to act on principle when faced with difficult choices.

Calhoun raises the question whether integrity should be understood as a personal or a social virtue. As she notes, personal virtues are those that are solely conducive to the well-being of the individual—the traditional example is temperance, a virtue that serves primarily to help the individual maintain health and psychological balance. Personal virtues are distinguished from social virtues, for example, charity or justice, virtues whose primary role is to enable us to conduct ourselves properly in our dealings with others. In addition to virtues that are overwhelmingly personal or social, there are also virtues that are *both* personal and social—for example, self-respect, a virtue that is conducive both to a proper regard for one's own moral status and also for attaining proper regard among others in a community. Calhoun suggests that most people assume that integrity is entirely a personal virtue: its value is seen as lying in the fact that it enriches and reinforces the individual's identity, integration of characteristics, and ability to take a stand. In opposition to this common view, Calhoun tries to show that integrity should be seen as both a personal and a social virtue.

We might try to apply Calhoun's line of reasoning to the concept of authenticity, asking whether it should be understood as a personal virtue, a social virtue, or as both. We saw at the outset that Trilling's way of contrasting sincerity and authenticity makes authenticity look like a purely personal matter. In contrast to sincerity, which aims at ensuring truthfulness in our relations to others, authenticity has as its sole aim achieving truthfulness with respect to oneself. Seen from this standpoint, we tend to suppose that people who worry about others, the "people-pleasers" and "codependents," lie at the opposite pole from authenticity. Thinking about others is seen as bad faith, a failure of nerve in our project of being true to ourselves. Authenticity properly understood, it is assumed, has nothing to do with social relations.

It might be the case, however, that authenticity looks like a purely personal project only because of the way it is generally understood. The common view of the authentic individual, we have seen, is of a person who knows how she feels about things and expresses those feelings in all her actions. What I want to question is whether this description by itself really captures everything we expect from the notion of authenticity. To approach the question, we might try to imagine cases of people who are authentic according to this definition but who do not really seem to be what we have in mind when we think of an authentic person. Consider, for example, someone with an unconditional commitment to making a lot of money by producing slick, popularized paintings. In imagining this case, we should suppose that the person we are imagining has great artistic talent and skill, but nevertheless dedicates his life to pumping out the kind of sentimental schlock that sells. Or imagine someone whose deepest commitment in life is enthusiastically and unquestioningly supporting whoever happens to have political power at any time, or someone whose defining life-goal is to always fit in and be as much like everyone else as possible.⁵

In each of these cases, we are imagining people who have deep feelings about something and who express these feelings in their actions. But in each case, the commitment is to something that is either trivial or obviously compromised in some way.

On the surface, at least, it seems that these people would satisfy the definition of “authenticity.” But would we regard such people as being authentic? Would we attribute to them the dignity we associate with the notion of authenticity? The fact that we hesitate to apply the term “authentic” in these cases indicates that what is crucial about authenticity is not just the intensity of the commitment and fervor of the expression it carries with it, but the nature of the *content* of the commitment as well. In other words, for a commitment to count as authentic, it is not enough that someone feels strongly about the commitment or firmly believes that undertaking it is worthwhile. For the stance to count as authentic, there must be a way for us to see how a person might have reasons to think that such an undertaking really is worthwhile at some level.

It is no doubt because there is a conceptual connection between authenticity and having a commitment to something worthwhile that the earliest notions of authenticity presupposed that those who engage in serious introspection have access to a deeper insight into the True and the Good than those adrift in unreflective role-playing. It is also because we assume that authentic self-reflection might lead to worthy insights that we see dignity attaching to the project of being authentic. It was only when doubts began to arise about the existence of a privileged truth lying within the individual self that the notion of authenticity lost its original connection to the idea of gaining access to an authoritative source of wisdom. When the older idea of privileged access to a higher truth is abandoned, as it is in our contemporary thinking, what is left is a glorification of intensity and “mineness” as goods in themselves, no matter what their content might be. We are then inclined to think of authenticity as a purely personal virtue, one aimed at firming up the boundaries of one’s own self or at strengthening one’s powers of self-assertion or at affirming one’s own worth as an individual or at some other purely personal end.

I want to suggest that this contemporary picture of authenticity is incoherent. To see why this is so, we might examine a case of a person we would regard as inauthentic—for example, someone who is oblivious to what she really feels and believes and who wouldn’t stand up for herself even if she did know what she feels. When we consider such a case, it is obvious we have a negative and disapproving reaction to such people. We regard them as shallow, empty, gutless. We might now ask ourselves, What exactly is it we see as bad in inauthentic people?

The only answer, I think, is that they are betraying something. But what exactly are they betraying? Are they just betraying themselves, like the person who lacks moderation and overeats? It seems that the person who is inauthentic is not just betraying herself, but is betraying something we regard as essential to all of us. We feel that the inauthentic person is letting us all down. This sense of betrayal arises because we understand that a society of the type we have—a democratic society—is able to thrive only if it is made up of people who use their best judgment and discernment to identify what to them is truly worth pursuing and are willing to stand for what they believe in. When someone fails to deliberate about what is important or comes up with transparently trivial or pointless commitments, or when someone refuses to stand for what he believes, we feel that they are not doing their part to sustain a social system that depends on people who do precisely these things.

What is it about our society that makes us think that inauthentic people are letting us down? Cheshire Calhoun provides an answer in her discussion of integrity. As she observes, political theorists since John Stuart Mill have argued that a viable free and

democratic society is possible only if there is a populace committed to discovering the truth through the unrestricted exchange of ideas. That is why freedom of thought and freedom of speech are essential to a free society. But freedom itself is only meaningful and effective if certain other conditions are satisfied within the society. There must be an educational system that ensures that people are knowledgeable about the issues that confront their society. There must be freedom of information so that people can be informed about what is going on. But it is also necessary for people to cultivate the character traits of honesty, courage and integrity for them to be able to deliberate carefully about what is at stake in the world and to stand up for what, in their own best judgment, is right. And, insofar as each person must start out from his or her own best judgment about how we should undertake common projects and conduct our lives together, there is a need for people to get clear about what their own deliberations lead them to believe and to honestly and fully express what they conclude in public space. This demand for honest self-expression is especially important when the ideas run against the grain of popular opinion. The expression of unpopular views is especially important for a democratic society, because it is a presupposition of a free society that it is only by playing off a diverse range of views in the ongoing conversation of the community that the best possible answers can be reached.

What these observations suggest is that one crucial reason why we value authenticity is because we believe that being authentic plays a fundamental role in nurturing and sustaining the kind of society in which something like authenticity as an ideal can be possible. The ideal of authenticity and the modern ideal of a free society are inextricably linked. If this is the case, however, then it seems clear that authenticity cannot be thought of simply as a personal virtue. It is also fundamentally a social virtue, one of a group of character traits that play a key role in fitting us for membership in a society of a particular sort.

This expanded conception of authenticity makes it possible to answer the charge that people who strive to be authentic are inevitably self-absorbed and self-centered. For if authenticity is essentially a social virtue, then the authentic person must have a valuable role to play in society. But authenticity will play this positive role only if it is understood in a way that parts company with some of the assumptions built into current thinking about authentic existence. To make sense of the social role of authenticity, we need to see that becoming authentic involves becoming more clear-sighted and reflective about the issues that face us in our current situation. These include questions about the kinds of relationships that will foster and strengthen a free society, the kinds of obligations we have to fulfill in order to qualify for citizenship in that society, and the kinds of global relationships we need to develop in order to increase the prospects of freedom throughout the world.⁶

Authenticity is also a social virtue in another sense. It would seem that authenticity as a way of life should carry with it the awareness that one's own ability to realize this ideal character trait is only possible within a society of a specific type. Personal projects such as being authentic or achieving dignity can be undertaken only in a world that recognizes individual talents, respects differences, provides equal opportunity, acknowledges the value of criticism and unpopular ideas, and ensures that there are no obstacles to freedom of expression. Moreover, being authentic involves more than just the awareness that a particular sort of society is needed. To be fully authentic is to recognize the need to be

constantly vigilant in one's society, to be engaged in political action aimed at preserving and reinforcing a way of life that allows for such worthy personal life projects as that of authenticity. If this is the case, however, then the authentic individual cannot be thought of as someone who is simply reflective and candid in acting in the world. Such a person must also be attentive to what is going on in the political arena and politically active at all levels of society. It is through this sort of attentiveness and activism that the authentic person takes a stand not just on his or her own life, but on the community's project of achieving a good society.⁷

In the first chapter of this book, I distinguished two basic orientations open to us in trying to achieve a good life: living according to an ideal of *self-possession* or *enownment*, on the one hand, and living according to the ideal of *self-loss* or *releasement*, on the other. The project of being an authentic individual, like the character ideal of integrity, is clearly an example of what I have called "enownment." Becoming authentic, as it is commonly understood, involves centering in on your own inner self, getting in touch with your feelings, desires and beliefs, and expressing those feelings, desires and beliefs in all you do. So understood, authenticity clearly counts as a personal virtue: it aims at defining and realizing your own identity as a person. The emphasis is entirely on owning and owning up to what you are at the deepest level. The common objection that such an ideal can lead to self-absorption and an almost solipsistic concentration on one's own psychological life gains its plausibility from its extreme emphasis on self-possession.

What I have tried to suggest in this chapter is the need to bring to light the social embodiment of authenticity, the kind of role it plays in the concrete social context in which it has emerged. Although it is natural to think of authenticity as a very private and personal undertaking, a closer examination of the role of this idea in our current cultural context reveals that it makes sense only in terms of very specific social commitments. The project of authenticity as a personal undertaking is made possible by a social world in which certain sorts of democratic ideals have emerged, and it impacts on that social world in concrete ways. My suggestion has been that, when the ideal of authenticity is understood in terms of its actual social embodiment, it is clear that being authentic is not just a matter of concentrating on one's own self, but also involves deliberation about how one's commitments make a contribution to the good of the public world in which one is a participant. So authenticity is a personal undertaking insofar as it entails personal integrity and responsibility for self. But it also has a social dimension insofar as it brings with it a sense of belongingness and indebtedness to the wider social context that makes it possible. This social dimension of authenticity explains why proponents of the culture of authenticity, and especially Oprah and Dr. Phil, are so concerned about the quality of our involvements with others. Commitments to family, friends and the wider society are not just afterthoughts tacked on to a project that otherwise requires total self-preoccupation. They are integral to the very idea of authenticity as a way of life.

Bringing to light the social dimension of authenticity also suggests that the opposition between the basic life-orientations of enownment and releasement is an oversimplification. It turns out that what is at stake for achieving the most fulfilling and meaningful life is not making a choice when faced with an "either/or:" *either* you focus on self-realization *or* you lose yourself in worldly involvements. Instead, it seems that a well-lived life must somehow combine both these orientations. Self-possession is

necessary in the modern world, because it is important to know how you feel about things and to candidly express your views. For this purpose, a practice of self-reflection and responsible expression is crucially important. But, as we have seen, such a practice serves its proper social role only when it provides the basis for an open and respectful exchange of views with others about issues that matter to the wider community.

The conception of an open and free conversation with others suggests that it is important sometimes to be able to release ourselves from our personal concerns and give ourselves over to the flow of something that is experienced as greater than ourselves. Such a picture of self-release in the flow of a serious conversation has been developed by a philosopher referred to earlier, Hans-Georg Gadamer. In his description of authentic conversation, Gadamer shows how the participants in the conversation can leave behind their self-preoccupations as they give themselves over to the to-and-fro of the discussion. What becomes central in a dialogical situation of this sort is not the opinion of this person or that person, but rather the *subject matter* under discussion. We all have experienced conversations in which we get so involved in the topic being discussed that we seem to become totally absorbed in the discussion. The center and focus of an intense conversation is defined by the ongoing play of ideas as they carry the matter at hand forward. The locus of the activity as we experience it is not my mind and yours, but rather the “between” made concrete in the issue of the *truth* of the matter we are discussing. In vital, intense discussions, egos fall away and are replaced by something much more important: the matter that matters. Gadamer describes this experience in terms of what he calls “total mediation.”⁸ The “being” of such a conversational context is best seen not as consisting of subjects and objects that happen to be causally interrelated at the moment, but in terms of an unfolding event through which people and the matters at hand come to have the concrete identity they have. In dialogical *events* of this sort, what is at stake is not standing up for one’s own position or beating out one’s opponent, but merging distinct horizons of understanding in order to reach an agreement about the truth of something that matters.

Gadamer’s account of authentic conversation provides a model of what I have called self-loss or releasement, and it therefore offers a counterpoint to what can start to look like obsessive self-preoccupation and self-indulgence encouraged by self-help programs. This sort of releasement means no longer putting ourselves at the center of the picture, no longer letting our egos get in the way in every situation. It points to a way of getting into the swim of what is going on around us without asking where we stand in it all.

Heidegger in his later writings referred to this orientation toward life with the German word *Gelassenheit*, a word coming from a stem meaning “let” and suggesting “letting be,” “letting go,” or, as the English translation has it, “releasement.”⁹ Heidegger was highly critical of the contemporary tendency to try to control everything through our own will, the desire to make everything measure up to our expectations and to make things come out in the way we want. At the level of social action, he claims, this self-assertiveness has led to the omnipresence of technology and instrumental control at every level of life. At the personal level, it leads to a preoccupation with selfish acquisitiveness and means/ends calculative thinking that generates social friction and an inability to be clear about goals. The preoccupation with control means the imposition of human will onto everything in the world, even onto our relations and our own selves. Seen from the stand-point of the quest for total control, nature presents itself as material resources on

hand to be manipulated and mastered, and humans come to see even themselves as “human resources” to be used for the achievement of ever greater control. Paradoxically, self-help and human potential movements, far from providing an alternative to this regime of total control, reinforce the faith in control by pressuring individuals to take control of their own lives through self-inspection, self-surveillance and self-assertion. We are even encouraged to get spirituality under control through means/ ends strategies!

The notion of releasement is introduced as an alternative to this endless cycle of control. It proposes that we put aside our constant preoccupation with self-aggrandizement and machination. Instead of encouraging us to master every situation, it envisions a way of letting go of our own personal agendas and experiencing ourselves as participants in a shared event that is greater than ourselves. In this orientation to life, we focus not on what we can get out of a situation, but rather on what we can contribute to the situation. The metaphors that come naturally here are “going with the flow” and “being part of.” The idea of releasement proposes not passive quietism in which one does nothing, but an activism that operates with a heightened sensitivity to what is called for by the entire situation. It is a stance that is motivated less by a concern with making than with finding, less by calling forth than being called. In place of the emphasis on calculation and insistence on one’s own ends, there is the kind of situational awareness of what should be done that comes readily to those who have cultivated in themselves a sense of decency and compassion.

In introducing the idea of releasement, I am not suggesting we should turn ourselves into mindless robots or become doormats who put up with whatever anyone does to us. On the contrary, I have tried to show that the ideal of authenticity, when properly understood, has a valuable role to play in our lives. But I am trying to call attention to the dangerous one-sidedness built into the concentration on authenticity that can arise in certain areas of the self-help movement. What is problematic is not the idea of authenticity, but a narrow and obsessive concern with that ideal at the expense of other valuable ideals and orientations open to us in life. What is problematic, as I see it, is not the goal of being authentic, but the predominance of any one perspective on the rich and dense weave of undertakings and responsibilities that make up our lives.