Introduction

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One of the leitmotifs of contemporary Western society is being true to oneself, which speaks to the central concern with the ideal of authenticity. For individuals living in the modern age, authenticity is what can confirm who they really are despite who they might be. Authenticity is the home of self-identity and the process of grasping the particular way of being that is properly one’s own. This inner-directed process places a premium on the individual’s self-discovery and self-expression; it also implies that external impediments can obstruct an individual’s path to authenticity. Inauthenticity, in its varied forms, is the pervasive obstacle to the discovery of one’s true self. Inauthentic people are disingenuous, hypocritical, and phony. They not only harm the individual’s quest for authenticity but incentivize him to participate in masking his true self. Moreover, the desirability for authentic objects and experiences produces a flood of products and objects in the marketplace, resulting in a saturation of the commoditized, kitsch, and ersatz.

Thus, the inauthenticity of modern relationships and culture alienates the individual from his real self. Due to these mitigating factors, the mantra of being true to one’s self is perceived as even more urgent, as the individual finds himself constantly losing ground to the overwhelming forces of inauthenticity. It seems necessary to ask, however, what underlying factors make the individual feel so acutely the dilemma of searching for authenticity in light of rising social inauthenticity? Modern philosophers have grappled with this vexing question for some time now in the context of the advent of modernity and the individual or self.

AUTHENTICITY AS HUMAN IDEAL: PHILOSOPHICAL ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

The rise of a secularism and materialism in the modern world has transformed societies based on traditional religions, roles, and ties to community into technologically advanced states knit together by complex
bureaucracies and market economies. The weakening of traditional social bonds has untangled the people from the joint identity of corporate life. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, modern institutions and ideas create the individual, as one who draws apart from society and creates meaning for himself. Modernity liberates individuals who benefit from increased mobility, economic prosperity, choice, and attendant political rights. Moreover, the individual is free to seek out new forms of meaning in his work, private life, personal experiences and social relationships. The liberation of the individual comes at a cost, however. When society no longer offers the individual a permanent and steady set of moral beliefs, social roles, and cultural practices, the result becomes a loss of “unity” in a person’s experience, leading to what Emile Durkheim observed as anomie: individuals lose their bearings due to rapid upheavals brought about by modernity.

Late modern philosophy attempts to make sense of the individual’s predicament as a particular self in relation to society. In the eighteenth century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the great critic of early modern thought, articulates the issue of the self and its relation to society as the cornerstone of his philosophy. At the core of his thought is a loss of unity of the individual. He posits that the self is by nature whole and undifferentiated, but also that society alienates the individual from himself. Claiming that the civilizing process throws humankind into a “wholly unnatural world,” Rousseau proposes authenticity as a way for the individual to reclaim his or her natural self. Through an exploration of the idea he coins as “the sentiment of existence,” Rousseau puts us in touch with “our inner voice.” Authenticity is the highest moral virtue for Rousseau, an ideal that is attainable through the non-alienating experience of selfhood.

German philosophers, avid readers of Rousseau, seriously examine the French thinker’s main assumption that pre-civilizational human nature is unified and whole. At the core of their philosophical systems is the attempt to resolve the tension between undifferentiated being and alienated reason. Georg Wilhelm Hegel, in particular, views the alienated individual as the problem of fragmented consciousness. The individual overcomes his or her alienation through a historical and cultural development of Spirit (Geist), or absolute knowledge. The self-consciousness of the individual is realized over time as Spirit progressively evolves through particular societies. Hegel’s ideas dominated the nineteenth century; meanwhile, his students, known as the Young Hegelians, converted his ideas into incisive political critiques. Chief among them was Karl Marx, whose dialectical materialism continued Rousseau’s project of authentic being but radicalized the view of alienation by emphasizing the uprooting and exploitative characteristics of capitalism.
Friedrich Nietzsche interrupts the progressive view of authenticity in Western philosophy with his skepticism of Rousseau’s natural state and his attack on the moral and philosophical systems of his predecessors. With his ironic posture toward the self, Nietzsche criticizes the notion of authentic selfhood, viewing it as more of an aspiration than reality. Nietzsche is highly suspicious of human motivation; thus, to posit a realm of inner freedom that promises self-realization through authenticity is just another form of false consciousness. By conceiving of history as non-teleological, Nietzsche exalts the self’s artistry above all else. If there is an escape from inauthenticity, then it is through art, in which the individual can affirm life in an unbounded reality without form. Nietzsche subordinates ordinary mortals to his ideal of the overman (Übermensch), which prepares the grounds for Martin Heidegger’s crucial distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity.7

As the most important thinker of the twentieth century and precursor to all postmodernism, Heidegger puts forward the most individualized philosophical account of the human being. Heidegger changes the course of philosophy by his destruction of Western metaphysics. In its place, he offers a path-breaking investigation into the existential makeup of human experience that shows how the self comprises a personal and individuated existence. Time and history are also bound to this individuating experience. For Heidegger, inauthentic existence is an inevitable and permanent feature of human experience. This is on account of the self being perpetually thrown into a social context, in which pre-existing roles, rules, and mores guide behavior. However, the self is not chained to its cultural past. Authenticity is a resolute choice that only a particular self can make, in which selfhood achieves something like a peak interpretive experience. Unlike his predecessors, Heidegger thinks that authenticity is not an experience in which the individual communes with the whole of nature. Moreover, there is never a transcendence of inauthenticity, nor is authenticity a virtue in the Rousseauian sense. Rather, authenticity for Heidegger is the act of realizing the absolute particularity of the self’s experience. And such an experience is nihilistic, according to Heidegger’s existentialist account.8

AUTHENTICITY AND LEADERSHIP STUDIES:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Having undergone this long and complicated development in the annals of late modern philosophy, the notion of authenticity as an ideal seems today to have acquired the status of settled conviction and has become
something of a fixed preoccupation in the field of leadership studies. In the last decade, leadership studies pivoted from transformational to authentic leadership as the field’s dominant theory. The model’s earliest origins can be traced to the attempt at refining the theory of transforming leadership, proposed by James MacGregor Burns in his seminal book *Leadership*, published in 1978. After several years of debate on the merits of transforming leadership, Bernard Bass and Paul Steidlmeier responded to critics of Burns by proposing a distinction between authentic and pseudo-transformational leadership. This distinction was rendered necessary by the fact that the ethical intention of transformational leaders was impossible to discern. In June 2005, *The Leadership Quarterly* published a special issue devoted to research on authentic leadership development, presenting essays that explored the general parameters of a theory of authentic leadership, its methodological foundations, and potential challenges to a research program focusing on leadership and authenticity. Since then, published research on authentic leadership has continued to emerge at a rapid rate and shows no sign of decelerating.

According to the general tenets of the model, authentic leaders are held to possess four qualities in particular: a high degree of *self-awareness*, including a clear conception of one’s strengths and weaknesses; *relational transparency*, in which leaders reveal themselves to others genuinely and openly; *balanced processing* of relevant information about their true selves; and *self-regulation*, a trait that guides behavior according to an internalized moral compass as opposed to situational demands. Such individuals model these qualities in their own lives and develop them in followers as a feature of their leadership. Despite some limited concern that these ideas are not entirely novel, advocates of authentic leadership generally praise it as the new and genuine paradigm of value-based leadership. The interest in an authentic model of leadership has spawned a diverse production of methodological and theoretical research about authenticity, authentic leaders, authentic leadership, and authentic leadership development.

Given the proliferation of writings from both scholars and practitioners, and their lack of philosophical rigor on the significance of authenticity, there is no consensus in leadership studies about what authenticity means. In fact, scholars routinely appeal to opposite and incompatible views of the authentic self. Some, perhaps unwittingly, borrow Rousseau’s and Hegel’s idea of the holistic self within an evolving society, seeing it as fluid in nature and formed through social interaction. According to these authors, the ever-changing character of the modern self paves the way for unethical or ineffective modes of leadership, animated by deception, dishonesty, and an uncertainty about...
who one truly is. Knowing one’s preferences, personality, and values is, therefore, the obvious solution to this problem. According to other authors, essentially channeling Nietzsche and Heidegger, the self is an idiosyncratic narrative project of interpretation and creative self-construction. Rather than truly knowing one’s preferences, personality, and values, what really matters is the freedom to be able to create one’s self. Others point to more contemporary thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre to set out the parameters of so-called “authentic existentialist leadership.”

Finally, considering the complex history of authenticity as a philosophical concept, what is perhaps most peculiar about the literature on authentic leadership is that its defenders generally adopt a notion that arose as an indication of certain problems about humanity and employ it, instead, as a normative, tidy, and leadership-driven solution to humanity’s problems. One noteworthy complication, as we have seen, is that a wide range of serious thinkers have disagreed vigorously about the definition and significance of the authentic self (for instance, Hegel and Nietzsche), not to mention the way in which they propose it to be thought of as a human ideal. As chapters in this volume will explore, some philosophers counsel authenticity in some situations and inauthenticity in others, while other philosophers present a defense of authenticity that is fundamentally ironic in character.

Another troublesome practice is the uncritical reliance in authentic leadership scholarship on underlying epistemological and moral assumptions, such as self-awareness, transparency of motives, openness to sharing ideas and feelings, integrity, and honesty. These assumptions presuppose a settled idea of the human self. But the philosophical development of authenticity points necessarily to the conclusion that there is no unifying idea of the self. As a result, it is not clear how the individual becomes authentic, not to mention an authentic leader.

THE PRESENT VOLUME AND ITS PLAN

The chapters in this volume present a full disclosure of the philosophical origins of authenticity and the alternative view of the self, which precedes the idea. Such an approach requires a broader view of the historical origins of authenticity and the examination of related ideas such as self-knowledge and deception. The enlarged temporal horizon and treatment of the related ideas regarding authenticity allow us to examine the ideal at the level of a philosophical problem. As a consequence, this volume raises fundamental questions about how leadership studies have interpreted the ideal of authenticity.
The conflict between the contemporary understanding of authenticity and traditional philosophy, we argue, requires us to revisit the works of thinkers who express self-knowledge as a cornerstone of their philosophy. For thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, human reason is the Archimedean point that provides the moral and psychological structure for the determination of the human self. The dialogues of Plato are particularly interesting in this regard because they present self-knowledge and its problematic character as coeval. For example, nowhere is this tandem on better display than in the unfolding tapestry of Socratic irony and Socrates’ famous injunction: “Know thyself.” Nevertheless, Socrates also professes ignorance and makes seemingly contradictory statements, and, yet, impressively tests his interlocutors’ purported knowledge of virtue, the divine, and philosophy. Socrates’ ignorance is dependent upon what he learns about the ignorance of others, which is a motivating force in his quest for wisdom. As a quest, philosophy is a way of life defined by the love of wisdom. At the same time, the truth about nature and the self is not only difficult to discern but, also, is communicated by philosophers in diverse and subtle presentations. Plato’s Socratic dialogues epitomize this complexity.

The influence of Plato’s complicated presentation of Socrates is extraordinary. Philosophers and writers after Plato, including Niccolò Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, and John Locke, to name a few, artfully discuss the importance of self-knowledge. For some of these thinkers, self-knowledge is intimately tied to intentional deception. Why did they think this was necessary? Were they responding to their particular context or did they follow, in some way, Plato’s approach? And, if such concepts are inexorably tied together, what impact does it have on our contemporary understanding of authenticity? In general, the chapters in this volume seek an answer to these questions. Moreover, each chapter presents how each thinker grapples with the dilemma of the human self in its relation to reason, politics, the community, identity, and history.

Chapters 1–3 of this book explore the origins of the concept of authenticity in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. Beyond shedding light on these origins, these chapters demonstrate complexities about authenticity as an ideal for human life that leadership scholars and practitioners have not adequately considered. John M. Warner, in Chapter 1, “The lie in the soul: Authenticity, hypocrisy, and self-deception in Rousseau,” demonstrates both how Rousseau is correctly seen as the originator of the modern concern for authenticity as a human ideal and how, at the same time, his thought was deeply critical of the practice of being fully genuine with others. Noting
that Rousseau identifies the modern bourgeois human type as a particularly troublesome example of inauthenticity, Warner nonetheless argues that Rousseau understood hypocrisy to be a perennial human problem rather than merely a historical one. This chapter interprets a large swath of Rousseau’s corpus to the end of identifying and exploring several of the ways in which human beings deceive themselves, such as conformity hypocrisy, denial, and rationalization. True authenticity, then, is exceedingly difficult to attain, for our acts of self-deception often occur un- or subconsciously. But this is not an unmitigated tragedy for Rousseau, because inauthenticity may very well be necessary for both the good of oneself and the good of others. As Warner remarks, “Rousseau proves to be surprisingly sensitive to the potential benefits of self-deception and even argues for its importance to cultivating virtue.”

Jeremy Fortier turns our attention to Nietzsche’s assessment of authenticity, focusing on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in Chapter 2, “Authenticity and the motives for political leadership: Reflections from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*.” Nietzsche’s novel proves to be particularly useful to explore for two reasons. On the one hand, in *Zarathustra* Nietzsche provides his most direct thoughts on the motives for leadership, in particular the highest form of political leadership known as founding. On the other hand, as Fortier shows, his treatment of foundational leadership is intertwined with the question of whether one can and should lead authentically. With careful attention to the textual detail of *Zarathustra*, Fortier interprets two concepts that occupy a central role in Nietzsche’s philosophy, the will to power and the eternal return of the same, concluding that Nietzsche’s thoughts on the possibility for an authentically motivated leadership are ambiguous at best. Whereas Zarathustra’s great honesty with himself helps him see that his desire to lead and teach others is an expression of his “will to power,” he is also painfully aware of the limits of what he can achieve by means of his will.

Hans Pedersen, finally, provides an interpretation of Martin Heidegger’s concept of authenticity in Chapter 3. In “Heidegger on authenticity: The prospect of owning one’s existence,” Pedersen offers a crystal-clear account of what Heidegger means in *Being and Time*, when he says that authentic existence is making existence one’s own. Given how much of authentic leadership literature hangs on this phrase, Pedersen’s contribution is crucial. In the chapter, he shows that there is both epistemic and behavioral components to authentic existence. Pedersen’s command of the work’s neologistic German terms helps the reader navigate through Heidegger’s account of inauthentic existence and its attendant components: the condition of “falling” and the everyday existence of the
“they-self,” both of which pose an obstacle to the clear understanding of authentic existence. Next, Pedersen explains Heidegger’s meaning of the terms “conscience” and “resoluteness.” While conscience is the condition for understanding ourselves fully, beyond inauthentic existence, resoluteness is an openness to understanding human existence, which can lead to committed action. Authentic existence, Pedersen detects, has a normative bent, despite Heidegger’s claim to the contrary in *Being and Time*. In the end, authenticity places an obligation on the individual to achieve personhood by explicitly choosing his or her identity as it is lived out in a pre-existing social existence.

Chapters 4–7 of the book examine the relationship between self-knowledge, deception, and leadership. These chapters provide both a greater philosophical horizon with which to understand authenticity and alternatives to it as an ideal and practice. The order of these chapters follows the chronology of the history of philosophy: Plato, Niccolò Machiavelli, Francis Bacon, and John Locke. In Chapter 4, “Different purposes, different lives: Socrates’ twofold presentation of his activity in Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*,” Brent Edwin Cusher aims to prove that the historical example often identified by partisans of the theory as the original authentic leader and the enduring inspiration for authentic leadership is, in reality, quite the opposite. Interpreting the text that is most emblematic of Socrates’ leadership, Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, Cusher argues that Socrates delivers two accounts of his life in this work that are diametrically opposed to one another. In the first version, Socrates reveals himself to be radically skeptical of pretensions to knowledge about the most important human things and dedicated entirely to the cause of discovering the truth, no matter how toxic this activity may seem from the Athenian point of view. In the second, and by contrast, Socrates argues that he is the truest friend of Athens, a pious man who spends his life going around to his fellow citizens encouraging them to live the best lives they can. In other words, Socrates’ leadership embodies not authenticity but a very public inauthenticity, or irony, which Cusher argues is actually useful for his promotion and protection of the philosophic way of life among his followers.

Mark A. Menaldo continues through the march of philosophy in Chapter 5, discussing how Machiavelli’s *The Prince* prescribes deception as a matter of necessity in leadership and political life. In “Leadership and the virtue of deception in Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince*,” he shows how Machiavelli’s ideas present a radical break from the classical and Christian notions of morality and human soul. The classical conception of virtue is made new by Machiavelli’s idea of virtù (virtue) supported by a modern understanding of human nature, which is at once
unlimited in its acquisitive desires and bound by necessity. By stripping people down to their true nature, Machiavelli unburdens leaders from their conscience and moral obligations. Through a reversal of conventional moral pieties, Machiavelli endorses the practice of deception in political life. The prince reaches the apex of leadership when he finally understands Machiavelli’s teaching of the beast and man. Represented by the famous image of the fox, the prince learns the art of deception by creating and managing the perceptions of followers. Menaldo argues that it is precisely Machiavelli’s hollowing out of the human soul and endorsement of leadership as deception that prepares the ground for late modern philosophers’ repudiation of Machiavelli’s thought through the idea of the authentic self.

Erin A. Dolgoy, in “The politics of dissimulation: Francis Bacon, self-knowledge, and the art of lies,” Chapter 6, focuses our attention on a thinker who was deeply influenced by Machiavelli – Francis Bacon. Her chapter provides a philosophical alternative to the ideal of authenticity in its examination of Bacon’s account of dissimulation, its connection to self-knowledge, and its political implications. Dissimulation, or the intentional concealment of one’s thoughts, feelings, character, or objectives, is often considered an unethical social practice. In the past, however, misrepresenting one’s self to achieve one’s political end was an art: a skill that was not only encouraged, but also taught. Bacon’s endorsement of dissimulation is premised on his epistemology of “The Idols,” which establishes that subjectivism mires the generality of human beings. Be this as it may, some individuals through circumstance and native capacities develop penetrating judgment, which allows them to escape subjectivism. This sort of mental clarity and gain of self-knowledge is multifaceted, as the individual with penetrating judgment can be either theoretical or politic. The latter is a practical creature who defines his or her interests appropriately. In nearly all social circumstances, he or she must learn how to dissimulate. As paradoxical as it may initially appear, for Bacon the potential to learn the truth concerning any given situation is premised on an appropriate degree of dissimulation.

Jack C. Byham completes this set of chapters with “Authenticity or reasonableness? A Lockean view of leadership,” Chapter 7. He contends that Locke would be wary of the call for public leaders intending to influence an authentic moral transformation in their individual followers. Locating the key insight in Locke’s political theory, Byham highlights the fact that “the state is not to be trusted with being our moral teacher and therefore it is not to be entrusted with the task of elevating followers to any morally higher plane of existence. The government’s task is rather to
care for our ‘civil concernments,’ not our ‘souls’ or our moral development.” Byham’s chapter goes beyond Locke’s political writings, however, to demonstrate that Locke does in fact believe it is possible to be authentic in one’s private life, provided it is understood in the limited sense of cultivating one’s reason to make progress in understanding. But one should not conflate this or other related notions with what one finds in scholarship on authentic leadership. Indeed, according to Byham, Locke’s view on leadership would be better described using the term “reasonable,” insofar as it remains well within the rationally conceived limits of protecting the rights to life, liberty, and estate of other people.

The concluding chapter encompasses the themes of the whole volume by speaking directly to professors at colleges and universities. What should a teacher of leadership do in a pervasive culture of authenticity when it may be true that a liberal approach to leadership instruction requires the need to create perplexity in students and distance them not only from their society, but also from their less talented peers? In exploring this question in Chapter 8, “Teaching leadership students to lie,” Nathan W. Harter brings the discussion about authenticity and deception back to earth to speak to the subject of teaching leadership. He sketches the difficulty of liberal learning in our time, which is that we exist in a society that accepts authenticity as a dominant norm and places a priority on information acquisition and skill-based learning. However, our liberal intellectual tradition calls for understanding truth and becoming a subject through this process. Harter compares two alternatives to teaching leadership in light of the status quo of authenticity: Michel Foucault’s truth-telling and Leo Strauss’s esoteric reading of philosophical texts. Both pedagogies find their root in the Socratic tradition. Foucault emphasizes the process of becoming a subject, a longer and more difficult journey of interior soul searching than is emphasized in today’s university environment. The esoteric method minds the problem of initiating potential philosophers into the search for truth in the context of a precarious social order. Historically, philosophers have faced persecution for questioning conventional pieties. As a result, thinkers throughout the ages resort to subterfuge by concealing their more penetrating insights through esoteric writing, which only a few exceptional minds will be able to understand.

NOTES

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3. Durkheim, *Suicide*.
8. See especially Division II of Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

For a representative, if non-exhaustive, sample of scholarship on authentic leadership theory, including texts both before and after the 2005 publication of *The Leadership Quarterly* special issue, consider: Bennis, "The crucibles of authentic leadership"; Gardner, "Gender, authenticity and leadership"; George, *Authentic Leadership*; Ladkin and Spiller, *Authentic Leadership*; Nyberg and Sveningsson, "Paradoxes of authentic leadership"; Schuyler et al., *Leading with Spirit, Presence, and Authenticity*, 147–231; Steffens et al., “True to what We stand for”; and Terry, *Authentic Leadership*.

11. Avolio and Gardner, “Authentic leadership development”; and Walumbwa et al., “Authentic leadership.” For two recently published and general reviews on the state of authentic theory in leadership studies, see: Avolio and Walumbwa, “Authentic leadership theory, research and practice”; and Caza and Jackson, “Authentic leadership.”


13. Cashman, with Forem, *Awakening the Leader Within*.


17. See in this connection Černe et al., “Authentic leadership, creativity, and innovation”; Shaw, “Papering the cracks with discourse”; and Sparrowe, “Authentic leadership and the narrative self.”

18. Lawler and Ashman, “Theorizing leadership authenticity.”


REFERENCES


Leadership and the unmasking of authenticity


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