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REFLEXIVITY AND INTERNAL CONVERSATION
IN SELF-HELP LITERATURE – A TENTATIVE EXAMINATION

Refleksyjność i konwersacja wewnętrzna w literaturze poradnikowej – badania wstępne

Abstract

The article is an analysis of the concepts of authenticity and self-realization presented in self-help books in terms of the modes of reflexivity involved in the pursuit of authentic existence. The source material is analyzed using the concepts of concerns and internal conversation developed by Margaret S. Archer. Advice on how to achieve self-realization is examined using Archer's notions of communicative, autonomous and meta-reflexivity. Other theoretical inspirations include the insights of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann regarding theories about identity, Nikolas Rose's remarks on "psy", as well as Charles Taylor's reflections on the ethics of authenticity, horizons of intelligibility and free choice as a value.

Keywords: authenticity, self-help, reflexivity, concerns, internal conversation

Streszczenie

Artykuł jest analizą koncepcji autentyczności oraz samorealizacji prezentowanych w literaturze poradnikowej pod kątem typów refleksyjności powiązanych z dążeniem do autentycznej egzystencji. Materiał źródłowy jest analizowany z wykorzystaniem koncepcji trosk oraz konwersacji wewnętrznej, wypracowanych przez Margaret S. Archer. Porady dotyczące samorealizacji są badane z użyciem przedstawionych przez Archer typów refleksyjności: komunikacyjnej, autonomicznej oraz metarefleksyjności. Inne inspiracje teoretyczne to rozważania Petera Bergera i Thomasa Luckmanna o teoriach na temat tożsamości, uwagi Nikolasa Rose'a o „psy" oraz refleksje Charlesa Taylora o etyce autentyczności, horyzontach znaczenia i wolnym wyborze jako wartości.

Słowa kluczowe: autentyczność, poradniki, refleksyjność, troski, konwersacja wewnętrzna

While our culture of the self accords humans all sorts of capacities and endows all sorts of rights and privileges, it also divides, imposes burdens, and thrives upon the anxieties and disappointments generated by its own promises.
N. Rose (1999), *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power and Personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, p. 3.

What's true for us is true for us, and when we know it and feel it within us, it doesn't need to be defended – just owned and ultimately lived.
M. Robbins (2009), *Be Yourself. Everyone Else is Already Taken*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 8.

Introduction

As Nikolas Rose (1999: 20) remarks, discourses focused on the human person have constituted a heterogenous body of reflections on the problems of governing individuals – including self-governance – in accordance with their true nature on the one hand, and within the framework of the social structure on the other. It appears that people – at least in the broadly understood "Western world" – have increasingly come to interrogate and narrate themselves in terms of an 'inner life' that holds the secrets of their identity, to be discovered and fulfilled (Rose 1999: 22). This approach seems inextricably tied to the notion of an autonomous individual as such. However, the aim of this paper is not to attempt to dismantle this complex web of ideas and practices to reveal an essentialist notion of the self free of the aforementioned inward orientation, but – rather more modestly – an analysis of the modes of reflexivity involved in the pursuit of authentic existence.

Empirical material used in this article is a part an of analysis of books and newspaper articles on self-realization and ideal of authenticity available in Poland, both by foreign and Polish authors, conducted for a PhD thesis. Sources are subject to qualitative content analysis based on insights developed in grounded theory, inspired by theoretical literature on the constitution of self and its relationship with the social in the field of sociology, philosophy and, occasionally, anthropology. Research is still in progress and at this stage a number of self-help books, as well as articles from "Charaktery" – a popular monthly devoted to psychology – have been analyzed. However, any wider generalizations are based on a tentative analysis, given that categories have not been saturated yet and the full spectrum of sources is only partially covered. Hence, the empirical material used here has an illustrative purpose and nature – which is admittedly not ideal, but seems preferable to a total absence of empirical findings.

As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991: 196) point out, "theories about identity are always embedded in a more general interpretation of reality; they are 'built into' the symbolic universe and its theoretical legitimations". Theories about identity are linked to insights on the nature of the social and practical order, although their relationship is dialectical. rather than one of unilateral determinism in either direction. In their view, "any theorizing about identity – and about specific identity types – must therefore occur within the framework of the theoretical interpretations within which they are located. Put simply, psychology always presupposes cosmology". In this case, the scope of analysis is not as broad, so it is sufficient to say that psychology – including the various concepts of the self – presupposes sociology. In this text, in keeping with Berger's and Luckmann's (1991: 195) arguments, 'psychologies' include "any theory about identity that claims to explain the empirical phenomenon in a comprehensive fashion, whether or not such an explanation is 'valid' for the contemporary scientific discipline of that name".

Adopting such an approach to theories about identity does not involve any judgement on their ontological status. The adequacy of psychological theories can be attributed to whether they reflect the psychological reality they purport to explain. To a certain extent – in many cases, to a lesser extent than they claim – psychologies produce a reality, which in turn serves as the basis for their verification (Berger, Luckmann 1991: 198-199). This is, however, not equivalent to saying that psychologies self-verify.

I treat the concepts of self-realization, the notions and terms they involve, as well as the models for which they provide the framework, as social facts, socially formed definitions, intersubjectively accepted as accurate descriptions of reality – regardless of whether they are successful as tools in the pursuit of authenticity and whether they reflect the true structure of the self.

This should not be taken as a case for radical constructivism and a declaration of disregard for the question of the veracity of these concepts, but as 'bracketing out' the problem of the efficiency of particular psychologies. Such a step is taken simply because of practical considerations: in order to delineate a manageable field of study. I fully accept Margaret S. Archer's (2004: 255) view that there is a "distinction to be sustained between the evolving concept of self (which is indeed social) and the universal sense of self (which is not)", but the scope of this analysis is restricted to the former.

What follows is founded on the recognition of the popular discourse of authenticity and self-realization as a sub-class of theories about identity in the sense outlined above or psy, as understood by Nikolas Rose. Diverse concepts of the authentic individual form not only a body of abstracted theories and explanations, but also "an 'intellectual technology', a way of making visible and intelligible certain features of persons, their conducts, and their relations with one another" (Rose 1999: 10-11).

Concepts of self-realization organize the ideals concerning our existence around the notion of an originary, irreducible and unique core of the self, shaped by "an inner psychology that animates and explains our conduct and strives for self-realization, self esteem, and self-fulfillment in everyday life" (Rose 1999: 3). 'Organizing ideals' can be viewed as a way of seeking a *modus vivendi* appropriate for one's self. Hence, I consider it amenable to an analysis in terms of ultimate concerns, as defined by Margaret S. Archer. Crucially, the development of concerns, particularly ultimate ones, as well as of the ability to mediate and find balance between them, presupposes the capacity for reflexivity.

Reflexivity

According to Archer (2007: 4), "reflexivity is the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa". Furthermore, "for an objective structural or cultural property to exercise its causal powers, such powers have to be activated by agents" (Archer 2007: 12). While this view bears a superficial resemblance to the maxim stating that barriers are only in one's mind – one that enjoys particular popularity in self-help literature and appears to have entered the corpus of vernacular wisdom – it does not mean that individuals get to choose whether the constraints of structural conditions will impact them. What it does mean is that the reflexive acknowledgement of external factors is a prerequisite for engaging with them in a conscious and considered manner. This, in turn, constitutes a qualitative change in the ability to exert influence on our social context. Moreover, it means that the influence of such factors has to be taken into consideration for the full extent of their consequences to play out.

It is particularly instructive to refer to a distinction in modes of reflexivity – between structural refexivity and self-reflexivity – made by Scott Lash (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 115). The former term refers to a situation where "agency, set free from the constraints of social structure" then reflects on "agency's social conditions of existence". The latter notion, meanwhile, describes agency reflecting on itself in such a manner that "previous heterenomous monitoring of agents is displaced by self-monitoring" (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 115).

Striking a balance between agency and structural factors is crucial in theorizing about both the practice of reflexivity and everyday theorizing about the self. To name but a few theorists, Beck seems to focus rather on social systems, while Giddens favours monitoring the conduct of the self (although knowledge of the social context can aid it), John Urry and Scott Lash (1994) add a third, mediating aspect in aesthetics. Margaret S. Archer, for her part, elaborates her theory in an effort to avoid both overtly sharp distinctions between agency and structure, and their conflation into a conceptually indistinguishable mess of mutual influence. For this very reason, Archer's ideas about reflexivity seem to be particularly appropriate for an analysis of the conceptual cohesion and practical workability – and in many cases a lack thereof – in self-help literature.

The material under study provides strong indication that concepts of self-realization often do not address structural reflexivity and explicitly advocate an almost exclusive focus on self-reflexivity, either severing any links between the two modes, or more commonly failing to acknowledge the aforementioned distinction.

Reflexivity can be exercised in a number of modes, which are partially defined by the form of internal conversation – addressing oneself in hypothetical terms to establish a *modus vivendi* – which dominates in a given mode.

What follows is an analysis of popular psychological literature on self-realization with the aid of the concepts described above. Some of the insights that form the crux of the argument were originally the conclusions of research on the relation between reflexivity and social mobility (Archer 2007). Hence, it has to be said that, unlike the research on which Archer's modes of reflexivity are based, the material under study gives little importance to processes of social mobility.

Another caveat that needs to be applied is the provision that while analysis pertains exclusively to concepts presented in self-help books, this does not imply that language is in any way primary in the making up and shaping of persons (Rose 1999, p. 179). I am aware that much like in the case of any other matter, textual in nature or otherwise, the content of self-help books is subjected to reflexive consideration before it is applied in the readers' lives. Looking into the ways in which individuals who pursue authenticity put the advice they receive from the (self)therapeutic discourse into practice would certainly make for compelling research, but

for now focus will be placed on texts – with the awareness that language does not exhaust the full extent of the mutual influence of individuals and social structure.

Internal conversation

Particular attention should be devoted to a key process through which reflexivity is exercised: 'internal conversation', a mental dialog between 'I' and 'You'. The former is the self as it is at the moment, the latter is the prospective self, a potential self that could come into life in the flow of time. Hence, 'You' can also anticipate the transformation of the 'I' and serve as a hypothetical illustration of the future 'I'. 'You' also has the benefit of a hypothetical external perspective on the 'I', which it can use to be highly critical of it (Archer 2004: 228-229).

Concepts of self-realization are grounded in the systematic application of reflexivity, sometimes amounting to a nearly constant scrutiny of the contents of one's psyche, However, much of what is said about such monitoring of one's mind is not conducive to prospective thinking – sometimes to such an extent, that one wonders if it would even be possible to establish a 'You' with which to converse internally. This is particularly pronounced in the case of concepts borrowing from the notion of *mindfulness* – that is of being present 'in the here and now'. If taken to the extreme, the practice of mindfulness could compress the subject's temporal perspective to the present and divide it into a myriad of small units of time with little in the way of cohesion – thereby leaving no space for prospective thinking and an internal discussion of the future arrangement of one's concerns.

The very idea of choice, so fundamental to notions of self-realization through self-therapy, is intrinsically tied to "colonizing the future" in the sense of attempting to exert control over it, as Anthony Giddens puts it (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 74). Furthermore, one of the necessary conditions for maintaining an identity, and by extension a self, is the achievement of some degree of constancy over time by bringing the past and present in "conjunction with an anticipated future" (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 80). This, in turn, presupposes the ability to conceptually move beyond the present – a capacity which seems to be inhibited, if not completely denied, by the demands of constant self-monitoring.

However, it seems that both the reflexive application of this principle and the extreme difficulty of achieving a perfect awareness of one's mind at any given moment make such a scenario a practical impossibility.

At the other end of the spectrum, one can find an economic view of the self, which treats one's potential as capital to be increased through investment. Concepts based on such economic language, often placing stress on self-confidence and the ability to visualize one's success, are naturally much more amenable to prospective thinking.

Another dimension in the mental exercise of splitting oneself into interlocutors of internal conversation is linked to treating the pursuit of authenticity as a form of self-therapy. Hence, one could conceive of the distinction between 'I' and 'You' as overlapping with the distinction between 'I as therapist' and 'I as subject'. However, due to the 'holistic' bent of most of the concepts under study, this is not the case. Self-help discourses seem conducive to a distrust of sharp conceptual distinctions – and in particular, the notion of 'judging yourself'. This does create tension with the aforementioned focus on self-scrutiny, because it inhibits the capacity to assess its results. This trait is underscored by the fact that being aware of one's psychic processes, such as emotions, is often reduced to 'being in the presence of one's feelings', thereby omitting any systematic deliberation on the basis of these self-observations.

There are three significant moments which can be distinguished in every phase of internal conversation: discernment, deliberation and dedication (Archer 2004: 231). Discernment is a review of the subject's options for investing their care (Archer 2004: 232), but while it serves to highlight our concerns, it does so without discriminating between them (Archer 2004: 235). The lack of discrimination is particularly interesting in light of what has been said about the relinquishing the individual's capacity for judgement and the unwillingness or inability to work on conceptual distinctions. The most radically 'holistic' concepts, particularly those advocating mindfulness, might lead to arresting the functioning of individuals on discernment leaving them unable to assign value to concerns and to commit to their pursuit.

Deliberation is a matter of questions and answers, as well as of amending and modifying questions and responses with the flow of time, changing circumstances and the shifting configuration of concerns (Archer 2004: 236).

Dedication involves an analytic ranking of the three orders (biological, practical and social) by virtue of the concerns included in each of them. The subject has to arrive at a personal judgement of worth and use this judgement as the basis for commitments (Archer 2004: 237). Since the subject in pursuit of authenticity is generally discouraged from judgement, particularly of the self-reflexive variety, the role of dedication in the search for authenticity is highly problematic – not least because of the corresponding imperative of the constant reinvention of the self.

Authenticity as an ultimate concern

Having looked into how internal conversation serves to organize concerns, it might be useful to define authenticity as an ultimate concern, albeit a particular one. Ultimate concerns are the organising principles around which all else should be integrated, the source of cohesion and continuity. However, even if the concern is constant over time, context does not (Archer 2007: 155). Since ultimate concerns are by definition not amenable to adaptation, their relationship with context is one of tension, the nature of which is crucial in identifying authenticity as the overriding ideal governing the lives of those who seek self-realization.

Authenticity can be linked to meta-reflexivity, which is defined by the pursuit of an organic integration between concerns, rather than a principled formula for their hierarchical coordination (Archer 2007: 310). This might seem a contradiction in terms, as authenticity cannot at once be a principle and an organic harmonization. At the same time, one might locate the specificity of authenticity as a concern in the fact that it provides a sort of a formal framework for the pursuit of a number of concerns – one that lends itself to shifts in accordance with whatever is identified as the true self at a given moment. In other words, authenticity may mean different things at different points in time and being true to oneself does not consist in static commitment to a single idea, but in a commitment to constant self-redefinition. Reference to an originary site of true individuality is a unifying principle for the form, rather than specific results, of managing the tension between concerns and context.

Since in the course of elaborating dedication, value is assigned to concerns, and since authenticity can be roughly described as the choice of the most adequate reflection of the self, the question of the horizons of intelligibility arises.

Charles Taylor (2003: 39) argues that unless some options are more significant than others, the idea of self-choice is incoherent and trivial. Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only because some issues are more significant than others. It seems that the self-realization discourse is accused of not providing such a horizon of intelligibility for two interlinked reasons: the orientation on autonomy and therefore unwillingness to impose value judgements, as well as the striving for universal appeal. As far as the former consideration is concerned, it can be argued – contrary to Taylor's view – that the value of choice, and at the same time the criterion of its intelligibility, can be ascribed to its autonomous nature. At the same time, it is worth keeping in mind Ulrich Beck's remark that individualization demands that subjects design and stage their selves, leading to this demand being internalized as a compulsion (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 14). Anthony Giddens (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 58) points out that since it contains an element of repetition, compulsion "stands in the way of autonomy, rather than fostering it". Inasmuch as it involves a self-imposed, almost automatic routine, compulsion is clearly at odds with the declared ideals of the self-therapeutic culture, but it should perhaps be kept in mind as an ever-present threat inherent in the practical search for the true self. Therefore, it is the content of choice that is autonomous – and even that is problematic – rather than the very fact of choice. In other words, as Giddens puts it, it seems that subjects often have no choice but to choose (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 75). Moreover, if the recipes for authenticity provided by the discourse of self-help are to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, the guidance they provide has to be very general – ultimately leaving individuals to their own devices.

However, I would argue that the rejection of free choice as a value, implicit in Taylor's argument, is somewhat misguided. Free choice can be made intelligible by contrasting it with a lack of choice, although neither can be encountered in a pure state. The problem with the intelligibility of free choice is rather that the culture of authenticity seems to be built on a number of irreconcilable premises.

As Rose (1999: 152) remarks, to be an authentic self is "a matter of individual responsibility, it is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice". If choice is a value in and of itself, then what are the criteria for it? Taylor (2001: 314-317) has identified multiple sources of the intrinsic value attached to autonomous existence (that is, one defined among others by autonomous choice).

One such source is the notion that the self is defined chiefly by its capacity to create and recreate itself – Taylor (2001: 368) traces this idea to what he calls the "expressivist turn", because this creation implies expression, understood as the externalization of the contents of the self. Another source is the naturalistic notion that regards the self as amenable to scientific reason, explicable in terms of biology, psychology, socialization, etc. In short, it is a notion stressing the possibility of a rational, systematic management – and, crucially, self-management – of individuals. The two sources of the self from which these ideas flow are, respectively: aesthetic, romantic as well as hermeneutic, and the cognitive-moral Enlightenment tradition – to which "expressivism was a response" (Lash, Urry 1994: 48). The interplay of these two sources can understandably cause tension, pulling the individual in opposite directions. The value of self-expression apparently lies in its uninhibited nature, which is at odds with the instrumental focus on control and rationality present in the naturalistic line of thinking. Interestingly, Lash and Urry (1994:47) identify this tension at the core of Giddens' theory of reflexivity – namely in the contrast between the hermeneutic and technical (or "almost cybernetic", as they call it) aspects of self-monitoring. It is worth noting that this particular axis of tension or potential contradiction is not the only one evident in the material under study. Therefore, it is instructive to present these spectrums of tension in more detail.

Expression and retreat into the self

"Just as over the portal of the antique world there was written the Delphic maxim, 'Know thyself', just so, Wilde says, 'Over the portal of the new world "Be thyself" shall be written" – remarks Lionel Trilling (1972: 125, in reference to Wilde's 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'). Hence, knowing our true self is not sufficient – we are also compelled and encouraged to act on this knowledge. According to psychologist and motivational speaker Leo F. Buscaglia (1978), expressing that which is unique in us is an imperative of self-realization and even a duty.

As Taylor (2003: 29) puts it, "being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself". Crucially, this expression is by necessity mediated by the use of socially conditioned means of communication. Whatever we express, even strikingly original, will have to be formulated with reference to already existing modes of signification (as mentioned before, these do not necessarily have to be linguistic in nature). Even if these are employed creatively and transformed in the course of use, the result will still have to be intelligible to someone other than the expressive subject. This, in turn, inevitably involves a measure of adaptation to context, thereby compromising individuality.

Moreover, as Archer (2007: 193) remarks, autonomous subjects have no choice but to utilise the public medium of language in internal deliberations and are susceptible to misinformation, disinformation and ideological manipulation in contact with others, much like those whose primary mode of reflexivity is different.

Modern concepts of the self are permeated with the idea that each individual has an original and unique way of being human and contains his or her measure, as Johann Gottfried Herder put it. Not only is it wrong to conform to external demands, it is also not possible to find an appropriate (that is, authentic) model to live by outside of ourselves – my own originality can only be found within, and I am the only one who can discover and articulate it (Taylor 2003: 29).

This conviction is a prominent aspect of the discourses of self-realization, although the degree to which individuals are defined in radical contradistinction to others and the social context varies.

The existence of one's own measure can also be linked to some key traits of the autonomous mode of reflexivity, as described by Margaret S. Archer (2007: 228) – autonomous reflexives are characterized by a strong faith in their standards and ability to tell right from wrong on the basis of individual experience. Nikolas Rose (1999: 97) voices a similar sentiment when he states that therapeutic ethics are based on answering "only to the demands of our nature and our truth as human beings". As Archer (2007: 284) puts it, autonomous reflexives, much like authentic individuals, owe no obligation to a third party. This is consistent with expressivism in that a retreat into the self is a precondition for self-expression: we must know ourselves to then be ourselves (although it can be argued that only in action can we learn what we are, but that is beside the point here). However, one can conceive of a retreat so deep that it would render any attempt at self-expression either impossible or not worth the effort, precisely because of the aforementioned need to compromise individuality in the act of communication.

What is worth noting is that this retreat into the self can also take the form and function of an epistemological defense mechanism of sorts – one that establishes a tension between expression and methodological individualism. Faced with overwhelming contingency, individuals seek a reliable epistemic foundation. In response to this, concepts of self-realization direct their attention inward, to the contents of their psyche, argumenting that no-one can question the veracity of our feelings and sensations and that therefore, they are the only safe anchor for our perceptions. In the most radical cases this may involve the quasi-magical conviction that we can shape ourselves by just changing our views about ourselves, ie. that we can become creative by convincing ourselves that we are creative, and confident by viewing ourselves as confident. According to this line of thinking, not only is our psyche the sole locus of undeniably true perceptions – we are also able to master, control and shape it at will. This view accounts neither for the influence of external context on our inner self, nor for our efforts to directly shape our context – in such an approach, the latter can only be impacted indirectly, through changing our approach to it and re-shaping our ideas of it.

Such a stance is a product of methodological individualism: the belief that "the social environment by which any particular individual is confronted and frustrated and sometimes manipulated and occasionally destroyed is, if we ignore its physical ingredients, made up of other people, their habits, inertia, rivalries and so on" (Archer 2007: 185). This generic view of society is attributed first and foremost to communicative reflexives – who because of their tendency to seek confirmation and feedback from others are very different from the vision of authentic individuality espoused in the material under study – but elements of it can be found in all three modes of reflexivity. The implications of methodological individualism for the views on the relation between concerns and context are reflected in the maxim "If you want it, you can get it" – to a point.' (Archer 2007: 184). Boundaries are believed to be only imaginary. Hence, by inference, if we do not get what we want, we just did not want it enough and only have ourselves to blame – which is both a great opportunity and a potentially crushing responsibility.

Self-reflection and the relinquishing of judgement

> *The preceding practice will help you develop the skill of simply acknowledging your internal experience. (…) The aim isn't to accept or reject. Doing so would create a duality based on preferences, which only serves to maintain solid self and fear-based reactions to experiences deemed unacceptable.*
> T. Roberts (2009), *The Mindfulness Workbook.*
> Oakland: New Harbinder Publications.

How can we move from discernment to deliberation, not to mention dedication, if we refuse to introduce conceptual distinctions? Internal conversations of the autonomous reflexive kind are "selective, evaluative and elective about the world in which a subject finds himself" (Archer 2007: 193). Therefore, for all the similarities between the practice of self-realization and autonomous reflexivity, there appears to be yet another

argument that the internal conversation of authenticity-seekers is stunted and never quite advances beyond the initial stage.

Keeping in mind one fundamental difference – the need to ask others for feedback – a fitting description of the effect of constant non-judgemental self-scrutiny can be found in the communicative mode of reflexivity. For communicative reflexives, internal conversation is "confined to ascertaining and establishing their 'first reactions' to some current exigency or eventuality" (Archer 2007: 274). This scheme reflects the "acknowledgement of internal experience" referenced in the quote above – with the caveat that while communicative reflexives seek the opinion of their family and close friends, authenticity-driven individuals are expected to keep their mental focus on a succession of sensations without any reaction other than acknowledgement.

As mentioned earlier, approaching authenticity as an ultimate concern shows the similarities between concepts of the authentic self and meta-reflexivity. Nevertheless, one fundamental difference is evident. Self-criticism – self-examination, self-correction and self-dedication – is an indispensable element of meta-reflexive internal dialog. Since meta-reflexives aim to improve in relation to an ideal, they always consider themselves to have fallen short of it. Thus, self-criticism is unending (Archer 2007: 303).

At the same time, while meta-reflexives are perfectionists, they are not entirely intra-punitive and are capable of partially attributing their failure to embody their ideals to circumstances beyond their control. In this respect, those who pursue authenticity find themselves in an unenviably paradoxical position: on the one hand they are expected to take full responsibility for themselves, while on the other, they are advised to avoid practices which may help them do so, such as self-criticism.

Self-appreciation and the striving for constant improvement

The problem of the apparent interminability of the search for authenticity and the corresponding internal conversation provides a conceptual link to yet another spectrum of tension. The discourse of self-realization is based on the premise that the self always already contains in it the potential that can lead to fulfillment. However, authenticity is presented as an apparently unreachable point providing a direction – much like the meta-reflexive ideal – rather than a state which can be achieved once and for all. Thus, authenticity consists in adopting a certain reflexive approach rather than in a fixed set of qualities.

Such a stance is supported by radical views on the continuity of individual identity, essentially stating that we can be born anew every moment and undertake the challenges posed by ourselves – ourselves we have yet to discover.

The picture is further complicated by the need to accept ourselves as we are. Leo F. Buscaglia (1978) argues that what we already are is enough, while at the same time advocating the constant search for new ways to express potential as an imperative. This raises the question of how the two tendencies can be reconciled. If we are fine as we are, why would we want to change? Should we really to believe that we can be reborn and if so, what would be the basis of such a new identity? It seems that the very notion of looking for the true self implies some degree of dissatisfaction with one's current state, a sense of lack that has to be addressed – Ulrich Beck, for one, goes so far as to define reflexivity as "self-confrontation" (Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994: 5).

Such a configuration of apparently contradictory recipes for authentic life bears a resemblance to meta-reflexivity, inasmuch as both do not lend themselves to "putting full-stops to internal conversations, because there is no obvious point at which it is sensible to think that one's deliberations cannot be improved upon" (Archer 2007: 300). The difference is that meta-reflexives are fit to move beyond discernment which, as demonstrated before, might be problematic if one were to actually stop at acknowledging internal experiences.

Furthermore, some mindfulness-related approaches claim that at no point in our life do we have a fixed and coherent self. This is problematic, since it would entail that we can never fully uncover and enact our individual measure, because as soon as we do, it will have already changed.

Conclusions

The impulse to seek the authentic self arises when the self has already been made problematic. The draw of the theories of identity consists in the promise to reconcile the tensions formed across the soul of the individual (Rose 1999: 157). These tensions arise both from the interplay between the individuals' concerns and their social and practical context, as well as from the fact that the aforementioned context is itself fluid and incoherent. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2003: 23) so vividly stated, subjects are forced to take their lives into their own hands in order to prevent them from breaking into pieces under the strain caused by "constantly changing between different, partially incompatible logics of action" – and, as Margaret S. Archer argues, the corresponding concerns and values.

The coordination of one's social roles seen as a game played with the aim of creating the optimal conditions for the expression and satisfaction of one's true self requires a basic sense of established continuity and a commitment to whatever is at stake. In light of what has been said of the problems inherent in the pursuit of self-knowledge, it is likely that the compulsively inward-facing subject fails to maintain such commitment, keep distance from the game and choose means appropriate to ends (Bellah et al 1985: 77-79).

Furthermore, personal identity cannot be attained before social identity is achieved, but it also appears as though the establishment of social identity is dependent upon having sufficient personal identity to personify a role in a unique and individual way (Archer 2004: 288). Interest in the pursuit of authenticity is an attempt to disentangle this complicated, dialectical web of mutual definition by giving priority and decisive importance to personal identity – declaratively granting the individual the powers of total self-definition and reducing the social context to a mere backdrop for self-expression.

However, the conceptual foundations of this grand gesture are fraught with a number of inherent inconsistencies which provide the dynamics of the concepts under study. These incoherencies are rarely explicitly problematized or addressed. Therefore, despite purporting to remove the tension between the individual and society, many concepts of the authentic self only serve to create further tensions. Not least because of the inevitable disappointment their premises generate (Rose 1999: 3), and in no small part due to the discourse of self-realization pointing individuals to "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions" (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2003: XXII) and the reductive attribution of social problems to psychological dispositions (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2003: 24). The fact that "we do not ever make our personal identities under the circumstances of our choosing" (Archer 2004: 249) can never be invalidated by the conviction, however strong and authentic, that if we want it enough, we can do it.

Moreover, precisely this alluring power of self-definition not only presents individuals with a responsibility they can never meet, but also deprives them of the tools needed to process and address the subsequent failure – a failure attributed to personal traits (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim 2003: 24). The resulting sense of not being good enough can then serve as an impulse for a further introspective, interminable pursuit of a true self.

It is worth noting that fully identifying the pursuit of self-realization with radical individualism would be a simplification. Some mindfulness-based concepts, leaning towards the romantic sources of the self identified by Taylor – but usually drawing from Western readings of Buddhism and Eastern philosophy in general – argue that the ultimate goal of the pursuit of the true self is to discover one's unity with the world. While such concepts represent a notable deviation from the tendency to fully remove the self from any determining context, they also lack any clear explanation for the causal relationship between self-knowledge and unity with the world. Even more problematically, they fail to provide solutions to, or even to acknowledge, conflicts of interest and the possibility of clashes between authenticity-seeking subjects. In the biting words of Robert Bellah (1985: 81), "romantic individualism is remarkably thin when it comes to any but the vaguest prescriptions about how to live in an actual society."

The crux of the argument is not to demonstrate that the notions of the autonomous subject, the self or the very ideal of authenticity – however elusive – should be treated as no more than an elaborate intellectual trap. These concepts are so deeply ingrained in how we think of the individual, that to disregard them would be to disregard the very notion of self and subject in its many iterations. Nor is it intended to present autonomous choice as an impossibility and redress the balance by presenting an oversocialized view of the individual. The aim is merely to demonstrate the deeply contradictory nature of the theories of identity under

study, which – in an attempt to open up space for personal freedom – make the search for a *modus vivendi* between concerns and context a very problematic undertaking, just as the seemingly self-evident notion of "being yourself" reveals its complexity.

Finding any solution for this conundrum in the interminable tug-of-war between agency and social context is a daunting task, regardless of how one attempts to tackle it. If we take the popularity of the many varieties of self-help as an indicator, the notion of freedom from structural constraints seems to retain its appeal, so much so that its price could almost go unnoticed. In keeping with the ideal of the authentic self, individuals should choose if they want to pay it, but for the conditions of that choice to be fair, they have to be aware of the terms of the deal.

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