

Heidegger's Concept of Authenticity: A Critical Evaluation

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Abstract

There is no doubt that man is a being who desires freedom and wishes to make his choice of action at all times, yet he is also caught in the habit of running away from the attendant responsibility. Being that the burden of responsibility drives the self into taking refuge in an undefined 'they' life-world, the resultant effect is that everyone always wants to be somebody else, and no one wants to be oneself. This development seems to characterize human behaviour in today's society. Consequently, it calls for existential engagement in order to redirect humanity towards genuine and authentic selfhood. This seems to be the concern of Heidegger in his discourse on Dasein's mode of being, hence equally constitutes the focal point of this paper. Accordingly, the research posits that until human beings begin to be true to themselves in words and in deeds, society will continue to be fallen and human condition will continue to degenerate. In addressing this dwindling human condition, the study employs a phenomenological interpretation of the concept of authenticity and shows how inauthentic indulgence is capable of denying man what it takes to be truly human. In the final analysis, it further proposes ways man can affirm his existence by consistently striving to live true to himself, in actions and in words.

Keywords: Authenticity, Dasein, Choice, Freedom, Inauthenticity, Selfhood, Responsibility

Introduction

Before we delve into the topic proper, it is necessary we make some clarifications on the concept of existentialism wherein the concept authenticity is found. In effect, existentialism designates the series of thinkers in the Post- Hegelian tradition of European philosophy. It became the most influential philosophical movement between the late 18th century and throughout 19th century. It is better classified as a movement rather than a school. The reason for this is because it is not a coherent system of philosophy like rationalism, Thomism, Platonism, et cetera. According to John Macquarrie, the movement is not a school of philosophy, but rather it should be seen as a style of philosophizing. In specific terms, they do not believe in abstract speculation but rather are interested in concrete human existence. Their philosophizing begins from man rather than from nature (Macquarrie, 1983, p.14).

This kind of thinking, was the binding cord among philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard (who is often referred to as the father of existentialism), Martin Heidegger (although would not like to be called an existentialist), Fredrick Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Simon de Beauvoir , and Jean-Paul Sartre. The condition and quality of the existing human individual remains the kernel of their philosophies. Accordingly, themes such as: “human subjectivity, facticity, finitude, absurdity, nothingness, anxiety, guilt, death, essence and existence, among others” (Unah & Osegenwune, 2010, p. 129) recur in their different analysis of the human condition.

In their determination to make man live an affirmative form of life, they denied all forms of abstractions with respect to existence. Against all objectives and abstractions, existence, for these thinkers, takes precedence over essence (Nyong, 1996, p. 37). They believe that against all odds, man must make every effort to live his life to its fullness on earth. However, they realized that there are some human “givens”, otherwise called facticity of existence, which may not allow man to affirm himself and achieve all that he wants on earth. For that reason, the only way to confront these existential facticities is to man up (be courageous) and live authentically. In the light of the foregoing this paper seeks to examine Heidegger’s perspective on the authenticity of existence. The discussion therein is structured into four sections and a conclusion. It kick starts with an attempt to clarify the issues involved in authenticity in general and proceeds further to understand Heidegger’s thought on it in particular, which again dovetails into a critical evaluation of his notion of authentic selfhood and how to cope with the call for authentic existence in the face of compelling existential facticities.

Authenticity: The Issues

According to the Revised Edition of Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary, authenticity is the “quality of being authentic: state of being true or in accordance with facts, genuineness.” It in addition defines the adjective “authentic” as “genuine”: authoritative: true, entitled to acceptance, of established credibility. In existentialism, it is used to describe the way of living of one who takes full cognizance of the meaninglessness of the world yet deliberately follows a consistent course of action (Unah, 1996, pp. 27-28).

We live in a world that is hungry for authenticity. We have often wanted our friends, leaders, classmates, family members, and everyone else we have interacted with to be themselves, and be truthful to us as well. Most significantly, we always want to have the individual freedom and confidence to say, do, and be ourselves without so much business as regards to how we appear to others and what they will say or think about us.

Unfortunately, even though we may decide we want to live in a way that is true to our deepest beliefs, desires, and passions, most of us do not in the true sense of the word. We are always comfortable following others; our friends, parents, teachers, the media, trends, husbands, wives and others. Their views and opinions often shape what we do. We do think, most often, that it is more consequential to be likened and to fit in than it is to be ourselves or to be truly who we are. Many of us always think that we are not good enough, that is, we lack self-worth and would require other's approval for us to be truly human. Consequent upon this, we always do everything within our ambit to be like others who we think are better than we are.

Accordingly, we consistently feel at loss without the other. For instance, the dark skinned lady feels she is less a woman until she has bleached or toned her skin to be like the fair in complexion lady. This happens because it is assumed that light skin complexion carries high premium of admiration and patronage than dark ones. In a similar vein, most people of African origin still think that being African in culture and in values, is a sign of primitivity, barbarism and lack of civility; thus, they do everything to appear like the white even when the facts point to the contrary. By so doing, the necessity for authenticity becomes further relegated as a mark of weakness and not coping up with civilized norms. This makes humans begin to drift along the inauthentic way of existence.

Heidegger on the Concept of Authenticity

Heidegger in his celebrated work; *Being and Time*, talks about a certain special kind of being in the universe. That being, he calls Dasein or human being, human reality. While every other thing in the universe simply is, only Dasein or human being exists. Existence for this special kind of being, he says, is a possibility which exceeds actuality (Heidegger, 1962, p.294). It is a possibility because human existence is a project which continues to actualize itself with affirmative and purposive action. Dasein as a being there, has a thrown existence. In other words, man's existence is an existence that is thrown without why. His existence has no

abinitio meaning, meaning only comes to his existence by virtue of how and what he authentically makes out of it.

Man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later and then he will be what he makes of himself: (Sartre, 2007, p.22).

And because the essence of man as Dasein is to exist, there are two ways in which he can live his life in the quest to actualize all his possibilities. There are two ways in which humans can exist while in the world. In other words, he can live or exist authentically or inauthentically. Heidegger says that human reality is a reality whose meaning is defined in reference to other realities. In other words, man as an existing being, does not exist alone. He exists with other human beings, and it is through the reality of these other human beings like ourselves that meaning is conferred on our individual existence. Put differently, without the other, I am nothing. My existence is made meaningful because others who look like me exist. But, while living with others, Heidegger further warns that man must not allow the fact of the other to deny him his individual authenticity. Man must not allow the reality of the human other to rob him the reality of his own individuality. In other words, although man is a being that lives with others, his existence is not a collective existence but an individual existence who has his own life to live and his own death to die.

What the above means in essence is that there is a way in which we carry out the business of living and it denies us of actualizing our possibilities, it denies us of reaching our individual existential peak. For this reason, authenticity of action is one which is taken from the reality of human individuality, freedom and responsibility. It is a life that strives to distinguish the self from the unanimous crowd. It is a self that stands on the part of what is true, pure and dignifying to human condition, even if it warrants standing alone, it is a life of self-affirmation. Human being, at every point in time, must make effort to choose a course of action devoid of public opinion but through self-conviction that this action defines me and would help me in actualizing all my possibilities before death comes extinguishing my being. For him, if Dasein makes no choice, and allows himself to be carried away by an undefined public, the 'nobody', 'everybody' and 'they' factors, Dasein "ensnares himself in inauthenticity" (Heidegger, 1962, p.268). Notwithstanding, he however says that this process can still be reversed if Dasein will endeavour to "bring itself back to itself from its lostness in

the ‘they’ (p.268) life-world. When this happens, human existence becomes authentic and impactful.

A Critical Evaluation of Heidegger’s Notion of Authentic Self

The problem with inauthentic existence or inauthentic self is that it is a life that is lost in the crowd and in the ‘they’ life-world and remains at a loss without the crowd. It is a life which seeks validation from the public. Such life listens and responds to ‘hear-say’, and seeks opinions in every decision before such decision becomes right. Put differently, authenticity of action in the Heideggerian rendition is attained when one becomes what one wills, chooses, or set out to be, consciously without hiding in the public approval life-world. It is then, that the self can be said to have achieved itself. Achieving oneself in the existentialist sense means to abide, live by certain principles, rules, values and choices which one had freely made. In other words, it is a life of responsibility. It is the ownership of action and inaction. The beginning of authentic selfhood is when one is able to say; this action is freely made, it is mine and I abide by whatsoever outcome it brings. When a self can say yes and mean yes, then that self is an authentic self. In other words, an authentic atheist, theist or agnostic is one whose decision was derived from a well reasoned and thought-out point of view, rather than one that simply followed the reigning and popular opinion. In the captivating words of Unah, an authentic self is:

The self that makes a commitment and stands by it, that is, the self that identifies with a consistent course of action. Authentic self is the self that calls a spade a spade, that brooks no nonsense, that is not easily swayed by social sentiments. Authentic self is the self that accepts responsibility for decisions and actions taken, that is, a self that does not invent excuses for itself. Authentic self is the self that accepts the burden of freedom which means owning up to what it has said or done (2002, pp. 73-74).

Intertwined with authentic self, is freedom and choice. The first principle that all existentialist thinkers establish is that existence is the foundation of all possibilities and that human beings are free. Man is not bound by any metaphysical or essential circumstance. He is free and the reality of his freedom is attained by the choices he makes, so also is he defined by his choices. Human beings must authentically choose a course of action because the failure to choose is a choice in itself. When we begin to give excuses for not choosing due to fear of the burden of responsibility, we engage in inauthentic mode of existence. We run away from ourselves. By so doing, we obstruct the spiritual equilibrium of the dictate of Being.

Consequently, Heidegger says that “making up for not choosing signifies choosing to make this choice” (Heidegger, 1962, p.269). When this happens, man becomes lost in the crowd. Thus, he must find himself. But to be able to find himself, his actions must be shown through authenticity.

In the views of Robbins, authenticity, most of the time, appears to be misunderstood. He says that “there is a much deeper awareness we must have of ourselves and of life if we are going to be authentic in our work, our relationships, and how we live” (2009, p.5). Accordingly, he identifies three different reasons why authenticity is sometimes misunderstood. The first is because it is unique to every person and for that reason; it becomes a bit difficult to give it a universal definition. The second is because what it means for us to be “authentic” appears to be time-bound or circumstantial. In other words, it changes throughout our lives as we grow and evolve. Third, due to its complex nature, we often run away from it by not “willing to take an honest look at ourselves, speak our truth, or live our lives in a way that is true. This resistance is based on a number of personal factors-fear of embarrassment, family programming, societal expectations, and more” (2009, p.5).

What Robbins seems to be saying in the second point is that what existentialists dub inauthenticity, sometimes, are natural givens, dictated by human finitude and imperfection. For instance, a known long time idealist who later begins to tilt towards realism may have been compelled by emerging social and environmental factors. Thus, the shift of position could be said to have come out of pragmatic convictions, not a show of incipient character lassitude. While this may be true, it also aligns with the call for authentic selfhood. One who in the course of existential revealings of Being, makes a detour owing to the discovery of emerging reality which is true, has not in any way demonstrated inauthenticity; rather, it is simply a realization and realignment with emerging reality that is true to existence. It is a return to the things themselves as directed by phenomenological doctrines.

In that order, to put it straight, authenticity is the self-affirmation of the individual. It is about being ourselves, understanding, appreciating, owing, acknowledging, and expressing all of who we are, both the light and the dark.

Authenticity in the Face of Facticity of Existence

At the preliminary part of this paper, we observed that human existence is replete with many 'givens' and facts of existence into which man was helplessly thrown. For instance, the reality that man is free and cannot afford to make excuses is a fact which man himself can never change. Again, the fact that all human cravings will someday be extinguished by death is an existential thrownness which man struggles throughout his earthly sojourn to deal with (Igwe, 2021, pp.1-3). That one is born short, slim, black, poor, born into a certain family and country, et cetera, are existential givens which have the capacity to weigh man down in perpetual grumbling. These facts are not of man's making. He is born into them and most often make man fallen with tendencies for resignation.

As such, the feeling that we are factually thrown into the world, most often makes man run away from action, from choice and from himself. Man at birth, does not choose to be born nor the type of family to be born into, yet he is born anyway, and expected to accept these facts of existence with existential equanimity, which is where comes authenticity. But a situation where man allows himself to be swallowed up by the cares of the world, he becomes fallen. And when this happens, Heidegger says, he becomes inauthentic and lost in the 'they' life world. According to Unha and Osegenwune (2010, p.229), "authenticity marks the tension between the individual's ability to attain self-realization in the midst of limiting conditions of facticity". Irrespective of many limiting conditions about human existence, the fact of freedom of man beckons on him to keep faith and continue to choose and act because a failure to do that is a manifestation of inauthenticity and bad faith. In other words, whether or not our actions would change those limiting conditions is inconsequential. What is most important to Heidegger, is that at each point, man must be seen striving to affirm himself, to live true his fact of freedom.

The authentic self is a genuine self. It is a self that believes in itself. It is a self that embarks on a particular project with an efficacious result irrespective of palpable limiting circumstances. Authentic self is a self that detests procrastination. It is a self that accepts responsibility of its course of actions, whether the outcome of the action is favorable or not. Authentic self is the self that does not ascribe its failure to any supernatural forces or predetermined conditions; it is a self that accepts responsibility for his decisions, notwithstanding. Recchoing this view, Unah & Osegenwune write:

To be authentic is to be genuine and true to oneself. Authentic self is the self that determines itself spontaneously, a self that owns itself, a self that says yes and means yes. To say the same thing in a different way, authentic self is the self that makes a commitment and stands by it, that is, the self that identifies with a consistent course of action (2010, p.320).

Accordingly, authentic self is a self that genuinely realizes itself. It is a self that does not fritter away precious time in the actualization of its future projects. It is a self that does not while away its existence in frivolities. It is a self that does not say one thing in the day and different thing at night. In community where everyone seems to go left, authentic self would insist on right even if it warrants being the last man standing. In other words, it makes the most of the time for positive realization of its future project. It is a self that claims ownership of the event of success and that of failure, it does not shift blames.

On the contrary, the inauthentic self is the opposite of the authentic self. It is a spurious self, a self that does not believe in itself. It is a self that always puts its hope in the “they”. It is a self that jettisons itself, a self that indulges in procrastination. Inauthentic self is a self that avoids and is dreaded by the burden of responsibility. In other words, it is a self that ascribes failure to destiny or a supernatural being. In situations where everyone strives to save his head, inauthentic self loses his. It is a self that dreads blame and failure, and as such abstains from acting. It is also a self that is not self assertive, a self that manifests what Sartre (1962; 1963) regards as “Bad Faith”, by always shifting blame. Consequently, Heidegger warns us to strive to be authentic in action and in words. When the human will succumbs to the dictatorship of the amorphous crowd and the unanimous public, inauthenticity is at work. The ‘They’ life has a way of taking hold of Dasein’s being and consistently makes him live in delusion and makes him live below his possibilities. The ‘they’ life leads man into not choosing course of actions which are capable of transforming his existence. When that happens, Dasein “gets carried along by the nobody, and thus ensnares itself in inauthenticity” (Heidegger, 1962, p.312). But the good news is that no time is too late to call the self out from the ‘they’ life-world and affirm the self. In other words, the ‘they’ life experience is just a stroll away which can be reversed the moment one realizes oneself and takes a firm and resolute decision towards self retrieval. That is, it is not a permanent state of being. Therefore, the existential call for self retrieval from the ‘they’ world is what Heidegger understands as authenticity. “When Dasein thus brings itself back from the ‘they’, the they-self is modified in all existentiell manner so that it becomes authentic Being-one’s self” (Heidegger, 1962, p.313).

It is a call for human beings to strive to take ownership of their lives, their actions and their destiny.

Conclusion

Having made a philosophical pilgrimage into the Heideggerian thought nay his notion of authenticity and its intrinsic values to man, it thus becomes convincing to agree that the doctrine of authenticity is truly founded on the need to develop the human personality by equipping Dasein to appreciate the subtle existential factors that could make or mar his ultimate self-realization, depending on the course of action he chooses. The effort so far made in the paper was targeted at exposing Dasein's potentiality to transcend his thrownness and actualize his individuality.

Notwithstanding the stance of the paper, like any other philosophical discourse, authentic existence as espoused by Heidegger has its weaknesses, its blind spots, its exaggerations, among which is the tendency towards a man centered philosophy which does not just give humans an unduly anthropomorphic understanding of reality but also capable of reacting unfavorably on man himself. A critical mind may be tempted to ask; does authenticity depend solely on the intensity of and individuality of a choice? And does conformity to rules translate to inauthenticity ipso facto? Can a terrorist or a tyrant for instance, be characterized as living an authentic life because he or she consciously and willingly chose to be a terrorist or tyrant? Conversely, in that case, a law abiding citizen can be adjudged inauthentic especially if his or her law-abiding character is ensuing from unthinking habituation? There seems to be some inherent contradictions.

In the light of the above contention, we have to accept that despite our questioning and the fact of perspectival status of knowledge claim, the twenty-first century is still without any complete view of man. On the strength of this, Heidegger on authenticity remains a document worthy of note; if not for anything else, at least for fresh and penetrating insight into the mystery of our human existence. His views no doubt contribute to the protection and enhancement of our humanity in the face of all that threatens us today, most especially the identity crisis of action, words and personality.

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