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Authenticity-Dialogicality-Recognition

Alexander M. Sidorkin
Rhode Island College, asidorkin@ric.edu

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Authenticity—dialogicality—recognition: an improbable journey

Charles Taylor has made a remarkable attempt to recover the moral ideal of authenticity as opposed to the debased form of authenticity, that leads to individualism.[1] He points at the dialogical nature of authenticity, and finally, in another work,[2] justifies the need for recognition. I want to show that the middle part of this chain of argument, dialogicality, if properly understood, cannot lead us to recognition in the sense Taylor ascribes to the latter.

Taylor offers a strong historic argument for the authenticity. He counterposes this notion to the medieval practice of assigning identity to an individual by the social position that she or he occupied. The ideal of authenticity relates to understanding of one's identity as an individualized one. "Being in touch with our inner feelings," writes Taylor, takes on independent and crucial moral significance. "Before the late eighteenth century, no one thought that the difference between human beings had this kind of moral significance."[3] Since then the idea that everyone should independently discover his or her originality and be true to it, takes roots in European culture.

Taylor draws on Bakhtin's ideas to develop a dialogical view of identity. Our identity is a product of a continuing conversation with a group of "significant others," he argues. "People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own. Rather, we are introduced to them through interaction with others who matter to us."[4] But even later in life the significant others keep forming our identity, because they are included in our personal life experiences and our ongoing internal dialogues. "If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes part of my identity."[5] Taylor uses Bakhtin's notion of dialogicality to make the point that identity depends on recognition by others, and thus recognition is a vital human need. So, if a member of a disadvantaged group is denied recognition as a member of the group, this may cause him or her to internalize a demeaning image of the self. Therefore, the contemporary liberal society must recognize equal worth of different cultural groups instead of practicing the "cultural blindness" of the classical liberalism.

My criticism of this argument by Taylor is that his notion of authenticity rests on monological rather than dialogical assumptions; that his notion of dialogue is instrumental, and his notion of recognition is implausible.

Taylor defines authenticity as being in touch with one's inner feelings. This is different from earlier moral views, "where being in touch with some source – God, say, or the Idea of God – was considered essential to full being. Only now the source we have to connect

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[1] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[2] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[3] Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* 30.

[4] Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* 32.

[5] Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* 34.

with is deep in us."[6] He acknowledges that our significant others make a major impact on those "inner feelings," and not only while the self forms, but throughout the whole life of an individual. Yet it looks as if only when the voices of others are transferred within the self, only after the voices of others become inner voices, can they become authentic. I fail to see how else one can reconcile the multitude of voices that make up the self with Taylor's understanding of authenticity. How does one know which part of the self is authentic? According to Taylor, one must listen to one's inner voices, and not let others simply define one's identity. He still thinks in terms of a single source, a single authority that defines what is authentic. This authority is now inside, but it remains a singular one. This, from Bakhtin's point of view, is a monological assumption.

My position would be that the voices of others, both internalized and real voices of living individuals, must have some part in defining the self. The internal voice within exists, but it only plays one part in the dialogue about the self, among the other, equally important voices. I cannot accept a definition of authenticity tied to the internal-external opposition. An individual who is completely in touch with his or her inner feelings, may also develop a false sense of self. Inner feelings may be deceitful, just like social roles often are. The criterion of authenticity is in the way different voices, inner and outer, interact in defining the self. It is not in which voices are given priority. I will explain this with Bakhtin's idea of authentic self:

> In general, the reconciliation and merging of voices even within the bounds of a single consciousness – according do Dostoevsky's plan and in accordance with his basic ideological premises – cannot be a monological act, but rather presumes the attachment of the hero's voice to the chorus; for this to happen, however, it is necessary to subdue and muffle the fictive voices that interrupt and mock a person's genuine voice.[7]

Following Bakhtin, I admit that there are authentic voices of the self, and fictive ones. The authentic voice is one that is a part of a chorus in the fullest sense. It is born on the boundary of the self with the outside world. The fictive voices are those born outside of a genuine dialogue, either from the outer realm of the social world, or from the solitude of a disengaged self. Authenticity is a function of dialogue. It is not "being in touch with inner feelings," but being in touch the world of other human beings. Authenticity is being truly and permanently open towards the possibility that I am not what I thought I was. My authentic self does not belong to me in a sense, but is always shared by others. I have no more authority to pronounce some deeper truths about myself, than other people who know me. Or, in other words, I cannot describe myself if I do not know who listens. There is no authentic self without another, engaged self. This means, among other things, that authenticity requires being different in different situations and with different people. Authenticity in Bakhtinian sense does not imply fixed sense of the self; to the contrary, authenticity is what is unfinished in me, it is what still remains to be said. Thus any one-

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[6] Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.

[7] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 249.

time arrangement, including that proposed by Taylor within his framework of the politics of recognition, can not really help in attainment of the authentic self.

My claim is that the notion of authenticity in Taylor's interpretation is based on monological assumptions. Such a charge may seem unwarranted, since he explicitly states his dialogical views drawing on Bakhtin. However, Taylor uses Bakhtin's notion of dialogicality in a curious way. He says approximately the following: (1) the self is dialogical, that is it depends on others to form and to exist; (2) because of such dependency, the others may impose a demeaning or distorted image on the self; and therefore, (3) there must be a proper way to regulate such an influence, namely, the recognition. This may very well be an interpretation of dialogue, but it certainly has very little in common with one of Bakhtin. Bakhtin did not equate dialogue with just any kind of social influences. Dialogue does not describe the social sphere of human existence; rather, dialogue constitutes a very specific form of social relations. Indeed, the fact that oppressors often influence how oppressed view themselves, does not in any way establish existence of dialogue between the two groups. Dialogue is a mutual relation, where participants have comparable rights to express their views. Dialogue according to Bakhtin is a non-teleological concept. It cannot be used for some further end, but is an end in itself. Let us note that this covers both positive and negative (progressive and reactionary) ends, however one may define them.

Even more important question remains unanswered, if the true recognition is at all possible, and if yes, how it is possible? How do we tell the true recognition from misrecognition? Taylor argues that recognition is not to be defined exclusively by the minority group in question, neither it is to be imposed from outside. Rather, true recognition requires "a fused horizon of standards" of different cultural groups. This idea apparently originates with the hermeneutic concept of truth as negotiated through dialogue; a truth that is elusive, probably unachievable, but is still ideally singular. Bakhtin, in turn, offered a radically different idea of truth. The truth requires a multiplicity of bearers; it simply "cannot be uttered with a single mouth."[8] Bakhtin's concept of truth is polyphonic. Truth is not a statement, but a multitude of simultaneous and contradictory statements.

Neither the image of a group, imposed by others, nor one produced from within, is capable of representing the complex reality of group identity, and Taylor agrees with that much. I would go further by suggesting that one true group identity cannot be produced even as a result of negotiations or "fused horizons" of several groups. There needs to be a multitude of identities, mutually contradicting but still meaningful if taken together. Or, to express the same idea in different terms, an identity is not an internally consistent text, but a continuing dialogue where many different players address each other, while never achieving a consensus. As with any other truth, the truth of group identity requires a multitude of voices. Only taken at the same time, might they constitute the truth in Bakhtinian sense. The most important here is that the different voices never merge, never reach a synthesis, or a "fusion of horizons." They remain different, albeit always changing.

[8] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 81.

But how does one distinguish polyphony from cacophony, when all the different voices coexist but never touch each other? The multitude of representation by itself is not enough to constitute the truth. This must be an engaged multitude, where every voice implicitly or explicitly answers to the challenges of another voice. In other words, different representations only then constitute a dialogical whole, when they are part of the same conversation, even though they have differing opinions on the subject. Another qualifier for polyphony is inclusion. The truth is, in essence, everything everyone has to say on the subject, including "wrong" or even demeaning notions. For instance, a certain minority group may be perceived by some as, say, of lesser artistic abilities. The minority members consider themselves to be of equal artistic abilities. In Bakhtinian world, neither of these two statements represent the truth. The truth is there when real living people engage in dialogue around these two statements. Now, for a true sense of identity the minority group must know and take into consideration demeaning stereotypes the majority imposes on them. In some cases, minority identities form in direct response to such demeaning stereotypes. But then, the truth of one's group identity is taught to a young person not only by giving him or her the responses, but also by providing of the stereotypes and prejudices. For instance, it is very hard to make sense of the civil rights movement without real voices of people who supported segregation. Similarly, feminism looses all its edge without taking seriously the ideologists of patriarchy. To avoid arguing with a straw man, one has to develop an ability to keep the voice of an opponent alive, strong and talking in one's own head. This is how the voice of an opponent becomes part of one's identity. Building an identity by an oppressed group must not require forgetting of whatever the oppressor had or has to say about the group; it only requires end of self-exclusion, and beginning of dialogue. Liberation does not entail expulsion of the oppressor's voice from the oppressed group's consciousness. The voice of the oppressor remains included, but on different terms, as one among many.

I was trying to show that any recognition is misrecognition, and that such misrecognitions, even of the most obviously demeaning kind are in fact part of group identities. But even aside from the extremities, the truth of group identity consists of a multitude of misrecognitions. True and accurate recognition is impossible. If you recognize another group exactly the way that group wants it (providing there is a consensus within the group – an improbable assumption), you deny this group your different, unique view of it. Thus you do the disservice to the group's identity.

Taylor starts out with a strong notion of recognition, as a vital human need, as a process that would bring an end to unjust and demeaning identities imposed by the majority on cultural minorities. He finishes, however, with a much more tempered, softer notion of recognition. This softer recognition implies simply a presumption that other cultures may have something of worth to say to all of us, and that we need to stay respectfully engaged with other cultures in order to discover their unique achievements on their own terms. This in turn demands "a fused horizon of standards."[9] Excluding this last qualification, I find the "soft" version of the recognition very much acceptable and not very useful. If recognition means only engagement and dialogue, then the notion itself loses its utility.

[9] Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* 70.

The notion of dialogue is quite sufficient here. Instead of saying, "we should recognize the special rights of cultural minorities so their members can achieve authenticity," one can simply say, "we must talk to each other both as individuals and as groups, because continuous dialogue equals authenticity."

Taylor's argument is geared towards defining a political solution that would better serve the aims of authenticity by way of recognition. In particular, he argues for a certain political model that would allow a culturally distinct society like Quebec to pursue some collective goals of cultural survival and at the same time to preserve fundamental human rights. This implies that the politics of recognition is aimed at a semi-permanent solution, at a particular political system with its laws and procedures. If this is so, I can understand how the dialogicality gets lost in the process. In turn, one may ask, what sort of a political solution I propose instead. Rather than answering directly, I would like to comment that the presence of a specific political or otherwise practical implication does not necessary make a good philosophy. And vice versa, lack of political suggestions does not indicate a poor philosophy. Somehow political recommendations started to validate philosophy, and I am not sure if this is such a good arrangement.

Admittedly, I do not propose any good solution of the Quebec question. Perhaps a good solution in terms of a permanent or even semi-permanent political arrangement is impossible. We do need to come to solutions from time to time. However, one may regard such solutions as intrinsically temporary and always inadequate. One can even regard the political solutions like laws, constitutional amendments, policies, etc. as less important than a good conversation that leads to those solutions. Maybe someday people will remember laws and judicial acts not for what they actually state, but for great debates they produced. I suggest to understand the political space is the place of meeting. How we divide money and power, is secondary and really not that important. What we learn about each other and ourselves in the process is primary, and it is ultimately important.