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Perspectives on "Authentic" Leadership: "Seeking Something Greater Than Ourselves"

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Perspectives on “Authentic” Leadership “SEEKING SOMETHING GREATER THAN OURSELVES”



— *Joseph P. Hester, Claremont, North Carolina, USA*

Introduction

Recent events involving the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath have exposed the complexities and disputations related to authentic leadership necessitating its re-evaluation. As we are aware, the social and moral developments important in our history inform understandings – of our values and culture – compelling judgment and imposing personal introspection. And so, in a time when ethics and authenticity have been truncated by narcissistic behaviors—including anti-democratic ideologies and violence – strengthening ethical authenticity’s moral core as a significant leadership construct seems appropriate. To bring clarity to this discussion and ground it both practically and philosophically, assistance is sought in the research of Mary Kay Copeland¹ and theoretical views of Charles Taylor.² Although they write for different purposes and several decades separate them, both believe an ethics of authenticity adds moral depth to leadership acuity and completes its meaning as a transformational behavior. Relevancy and meaning are achieved by placing this

discussion in a context apropos to the values upheaval now defining the contemporary American political landscape. Clearly, and many are unaware, we are living in the afterglow of an ideological revolution – the Euro-centric Enlightenment – which has been molding our thinking for more than two centuries. Much of Taylor’s work is directed at unraveling some of the inherited consequences of this mental shaping on his way to clarifying what he calls “the ethics of authenticity.” Taylor believes that several of these consequences have narrowed our ethical understanding, polarized our ethics and values, and devalued any hope for an

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Personal characteristics and ethical leadership:

This research revealed that ethical leaders were those that were honest, trustworthy, and fair, made decisions based on principles, acted ethically in their professional setting and personal lives. This was defined as a moral person component of ethical leadership.

— Copeland, Mary Kay, p. 122.

See also: Treviño, L., Brown, M., & Hartman, L. (2003). A qualitative investigation of perceived executive ethical leadership: Perceptions from inside and outside the executive suite. *Human Relations*, 55, 5–37. Treviño, L., Hartman, and Brown, L. (2000). Moral person and moral manager: How executives develop a reputation for ethical leadership, *California Management Review*, 42, 128–142.

authentic ethic. And we can agree, for the 21st century has witnessed the politicization of values and ethics and the continuation of the culture war debates definitive of the 20th

century. With ethics now swirling in a confusing political current, our values, as well as values-based institutions, have been duly affected making an ethics of authenticity a questionable choice as a values-based leadership construct and moving us to its reconsideration.

Gaining Perspective about an Ethics of Authenticity

Mary Kay Copeland's review and comments about values-based leadership enrich the substance and importance of "authentic leadership" revealing its complexities when construed as a leadership construct within a business environment. Her commentary demonstrates the difficulties of framing "authenticity" within a narrow and abstract definition omitting its contextual situation. It is within a living, working context that "authenticity" attains its meaning and value. Consequently, after reviewing the prevailing literature and research on the various constructs supporting values-based leadership, Copeland turns to explicating the benefits of authentic leadership as a values-based leadership construct and within an organizational (business) setting. Her review and research demonstrate that *transformational* and *ethical behaviors* augment authentic leadership's effectiveness.

Following Copeland's explication is an explanation of Charles Taylor's ethics of authenticity. Reading Taylor is like taking a trip through the history of ideas about knowledge and ethics that arose during the Euro-centric Enlightenment and brought forward through various normative ideologies and disputes. His prolonged study identified several of these as "problems leaking into our time" – obstacles which have diminished the meaning and impact of ethics. He identifies these as narcissistic individualism, subjectivism, and relativism as correlated issues leading to the rise of utilitarianism and the casting of ethics as transactional. Significant to leadership studies, both Copeland and Taylor provide insights enabling the positioning of ethical authenticity as proto-typical of values-based leadership. Both agree that authenticity is ethical and transformational *if and only if* it (1) seeks a moral horizon stretching beyond personal concerns and goals, (2) pursues moral inclusiveness, and (3) is freely entered into as a collective effort. Although they approach ethical authenticity from different perspectives and for different reasons, the discussions provided by Copeland and Taylor confirm the requirements of ethical authenticity as a practical leadership behavior and as an ethical commitment requiring openness, honesty, and accountability.

Mary Kay Copeland: Appraisal and Insights

Luthans and Avolio suggest that authentic leadership occurs when self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors, on the part of both leaders and followers, are present, fostered, and nurtured which stimulates positive personal growth and self-development on the part of both the leader and follower. The authors conclude: *The authentic leader is confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, moral/ethical, future-oriented, and gives priority to developing associates to be leaders. The authentic leader is true to him/herself and the exhibited behavior positively transforms or develops associates into leaders themselves.*

Luthans, F. and Avolio, B. 2003 "Authentic leadership: A positive development approach." In K. Cameron, J. Dutton, & R. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship*, pp. 241- 258. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Mary Kay Copeland's review and analysis of values-based leadership constructs opens avenues of exploration about ethics, authenticity, and transformational leadership pointing out where research converges and diverges and where additional research is required. Her effort to compare and contrast various values-based leadership constructs allows for thorough inspection and reconsideration, including how each of these constructs are complimentary and/or supportive of authentic leadership. In this lengthy analysis, she explains the importance of continuing the development and of authentic leadership through empirical research and documentation. A focus on her examination of *ethical* and *authentic* leadership and their relationship to *transformational* behaviors reveals insights and examples demonstrating how these various constructs are able to be folded into a singular description of "authentic leadership." Although strictly empirical with reliance of statistical correlations, many of her interpretive comments reveal a connection of authenticity with the more philosophical and intrinsic views of Charles Taylor. This connection – the more narrowly focused leadership research of Copeland and the more pervasive and philosophical understandings of Taylor – helps expose the social, ethical, and intrinsic nature of "authenticity" as a transformational behavior.

When stating the purpose of her review and examination, Copeland comments:

*This paper outlines the prevalent definitions and theories of authentic leadership. Practitioners, scholars and authors seemed to concur that there is a great need for authenticity and authentic leadership in our 21st century leaders. Researchers diverge on the definition of an authentic leader and what is required to access and develop authentic leaders. It is not unusual for a new construct to have a number of different theories and conclusions initially as scholars, researchers and practitioners wrestle with the many potential theories and truths surrounding a new construct. It is necessary and critical to continue research and analysis to further clarify the construct of authentic leadership theory and to expand our understanding how authentic leaders can be developed.*³

Copeland's review demonstrates the positive and *practical* outcomes for being ethical, authentic, and transformational. These are: (1) being able to *communicate* through word and example with those in one's working environment, (2) translating ethical behaviors into workplace *actions*, and (3) having the ability to create a *vision* for others to follow. Her documentation shows that when followers are motivated by leaders who are respectful, approachable, and model ethical and authentic behaviors, the outcomes for the workplace are transformational.

In life, as in the workplace, judgments of value are always made against a background of existing relationships, factual beliefs, and general cooperative acceptance. Often unmentioned or undetected is how shrouded assumptions influence judgments and decision-making. Consequently, it's important that Copeland identifies research showing transformational competence arising more fully within a transparent, equitable, and dialogical setting, a setting open to all in the working environment. This correlates with Taylor's idea of the *transcendent* nature of authenticity –

We need leaders who lead with purpose, values, and integrity; leaders who build enduring organizations, motivate their employees to provide superior customer service, and create long-term values to shareholders.

– George, B. (2003). *Authentic leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 9.

of moving beyond selfish inclinations and seeking together (dialogically and dialectically) a more ethically inclusive working environment.

Copeland's research finds that when ethical, authentic, and transformational qualities are combined, leaders are more effective in managing their organizations and transforming what heretofore were negative organizational climates into more positive and fulfilling places to work. She says:

"Authentic, ethical, transformational leadership provides an enthusiasm and support for that which is good and moral and fosters trust and enthusiasm." [and] "In assessing the VBL component of transformational leadership, it appears to overlap significantly with other VBL constructs of authentic and ethical leadership."

Copeland also corroborates how each of these behaviors contributes incrementally to leadership efficiency. She comments,

"When a leader is ethical and authentic, by definition, their values are morally uplifting. A transformational leader augments an ethical/authentic leader's effectiveness by creating enthusiasm around the good, noble and excellent principles that ethical/authentic leaders possess."⁴

Although judging what is and what is not transformational is somewhat subjective and precarious, Copeland points to organizational results as a validation of its effects. She says the effectiveness of the leader's authenticity, along with his or her ethical commitments, is augmented by "the effectiveness that the transformational qualities produce." That is, if a leader is simply authentic and ethical, but lacks a ***positive empowering capacity***, their authentic/ethical leadership effectiveness will have less of an impact." Thus, Copeland centers the meaning of "transformation" in the ability of leadership to empower employees to make decisions to which they will be held accountable.

Although this conclusion relies heavily on personal interpretation and judgment, Copeland empirically documents the effectiveness of a leader who is able to communicate effectively, share and implement a vision, and translate this vision into workplace actions. The significance of "empowerment" cannot be over estimated. It is the ability of leaders at any level to set aside their own authority allowing followers to freely participate in workplace discussions about matters of importance, collectively agree and act on group decisions, and accept accountability for the quality and efficiency of their work. Thus, accountability within the organization runs both vertically and horizontally. No one is exempt from responsibility in a transformational culture.

Briefly, we can say that authenticity involves creation and construction as well as discovery, originality, and frequently opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it requires openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and a self-definition in dialogue.
- Charles Taylor, EA, p. 66.

Copeland explains,

Furthering ethical and authentic ideology is often an intellectual pursuit that requires leaders to challenge followers to a higher level of thinking and acting....An authentic/ethical and transformational leader uses staff development and intellectual stimulation as a way to challenge, communicate and transfer these beliefs and values to

*others. Leaders that are ethical and authentic, but lack transformational behaviors, may have greater difficulty conveying intellectually challenging concepts to their followers.*⁵

One can surmise from Copeland's research that an ethics of authenticity provides a language of ethics that is applicable to personal as well as corporate and organizational cultures where leaders and others are able to move away from *mere* ethical and job-related compliance to a more *fluid* notion of "self" through both vertical and horizontal interactions. The authentic culture is permeated with dignity and respect, allowing of communication, and integrity. Thus, important to a transformational culture is self-identity. As these interactions are infused with dignity and respect, a more ethically transformational culture is able to rise. Consequently, an ethics of authenticity releases those within an organization (family, church, business, political body, etc.) from a more restricted concept of "self" defined by roles and duties only, to a collective notion that "we're all in this together." Personal identity and the ability to identify with a group, business, etc., brings with it pride and cohesion. Although everyone knows their place in the organizational hierarchy, "place" has diminished in importance being replaced with respect and responsibility. Psychologically and socially, this provides an ontological foundation for creating a pathway to ethical transformation.

Charles Taylor's "The Ethics of Authenticity"

With a bent toward the intrinsic, Taylor identifies the "moral ideal" – what he calls "the ethics of authenticity" – as being true to oneself, aiming toward self-fulfillment, and having a vision of what a better life would be. Being a comprehensive ideal, Taylor's notion of ethical authenticity has personal applications as well as applications in large environments such as business and industry and politics. A clue to Taylor's intentions is his saying that although this ideal is self-referential, it is not a singular disposition – "... its dialogical setting ... binds us to others." This reveals two important dimensions of ethics applicable to any human environment:

- 1) First, if ethics is self-referential only it becomes personally reductive, subjective, and ethically relative lacking a dialogic dimension. This kind of ethic has the potential of being personally narcissistic. It is generally *individualistic*- and *rights*-oriented. Rights-oriented behavior nearly always focuses on personal freedoms: the "freedom to join," "freedom to express views," or "freedom to protest," etc. Noticeably, all of these have roots in democracy and in morality stemming from such moral ideas as equality and nondiscrimination, fair-treatment, personal responsibility, and freedom of speech. On the negative side, morally speaking, the right to violence is prohibited. We can protest and demonstrate, but when this carries over to violence, we have perhaps lost our moral compass and connection to others. Of course, many believe that violence is sometimes justified when struggling against unfair and immoral laws and practices. They often say, "Might makes right!" but we know this is a failed inference. For this reason, dialogical civility is recommended for resolving our social, political, and workplace differences.
- 2) The second dimension expands ethics beyond self to a more "universal ethics" or to what is generally called "human rights." The roots of this notion are found in the deistic religion of our founding fathers and conceived as "natural rights." Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence the following: "*When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's god entitle them, a decent*

respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. Thus, in the minds of many, legal rights and moral rights often become “natural rights.” Our founders considered this to be “self-evident,” requiring neither argument nor proof. The belief undergirding natural rights is that they are not dependent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and are therefore thought of as universal, transcendent, and unalienable (i.e., rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws) and indigenous to humanity.

Understanding the strong pull of ethics as personal and individual and the unalienable ideas of its second dimension, America took a *utilitarian* approach and placed its most cherished values into law, its Constitution. Thus, America is thought of as a nation based on law. This has become a “sacred” dimension of American democracy. The idea of “justice” supports the moral foundation of law. “Justice” is defined as fairness, moral rightness, or a process of law in

For Taylor, reconciliation embraces others who are different from us and aims to create a virtuous culture. Taylor's critics overlook the liberal implications of his ethic and also do not recognize his commitment to the plural diversity in modern societies. Taylor's communitarianism (post-liberalism in his mind) aims to create trust, openness and democratic accountability. The article concludes that democratic practice must also engage with others who are different from us, fostering a fusion of horizons that creates reconciliation and understanding.

— Lehman, Glen (2006) “Perspectives on Charles Taylor's reconciled society.” *Philosophy & social criticism*, 32(3):347-376.

which every person receives his or her due from the system, including all rights, both natural and legal. As a complex moral/legal term and supported by an ethic of authenticity, justice requires transparency, honesty, responsibility, dignity, and integrity to work. Easy to understand, ethical authenticity, when viewed through the eyes of the American Constitution and the seminal idea of “justice,” is a fluid idea, often politically charged and easily overlooked, but vital to democracy and what democracy stands for.

More philosophically, Charles Taylor stresses that when striving toward “ethical authenticity” we begin to loosen the chains of self-centeredness and personal narcissism, ethics first dimension. We are not striving toward a collective and unified ethic. Being a philosopher and understanding the strong pull of psychological egoism, Taylor says the decision to be ethical

The collapsing of communitarian relations and the increasing isolation of individuals in relation to each other figure prominently in the studies of various authors who sought to describe contemporary ways of life. We address this issue as presented by Charles Taylor in SOURCES OF THE SELF and in THE ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY. The author identifies three “malaises” that are present in modern society: individualism, the primacy of instrumental reason and the alienation of individuals from the political sphere. Proposing to avoid a restrictively negativist reading of such phenomena, Taylor presents them as *transformations* of the dynamic frameworks that constitute the modern identity.

— Gilberto, Hoffmann Marcon and Reinaldo Furlan. “The issue of identity in postmodernity: authenticity and individualism in Charles Taylor.”—<https://www.Scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sciarttext&pid=S0103-65642020000100201&lng=en&nrm=l so&tlng=en>.

is *ontologically* possible because we have the capacity for being “other-regarding and for being self-regarding” in our behavior; seldom are we just one or the other. This is a truism we all experience. Taylor is hopeful that other-regarding behaviors will dominate our lives, but there are no guarantees; this must be intentionally pursued.

In his copious writings, Taylor identifies *four ideas* which he says comprise the essence of an ethics of authenticity. These are *personal identity, dialogical civility, transcendence, and reconciliation*. A close examination shows their correlation with what Copeland calls “transformational behaviors.” The means for releasing these behaviors from more self-centered inclinations are unearthed, says Taylor, in *our willingness to engage* in collective dialogue as we identify values and conduct that transcend selfish desires and motives.

This is also in concert with philosopher Kurt Baier’s notion of behaviors that can be recommended to everybody because “they successfully promote the best possible life for everybody, and that the best possible life for everybody cannot be achieved in isolation but only in social contexts in which the pursuits of each impinge on the pursuits of others.”⁶

Consequently, an ethics of authenticity entails shared understandings, mutual obligations, and accountability. On the personal side this will be a journey of *reconciliation* involving reassessing one’s personal values and ethics while giving respectful consideration to the ethical views of others. Taylor points out that this is not only a personal journey because it articulates something beyond self that is more morally inclusive, or, as Taylor says, “morally higher.” Consequently, that which is morally encompassing recognizes human diversity and within this diversity seeks values that are unarguably collectively (universally) important.

Practically and by implication the journey of reconciliation will involve *intentional self-marginalization*, setting aside selfish concerns and motives, seeking input from others, and respectfully placing collective values at the forefront of decision making. This does not mean removing one’s unique skills and position from the equation, only a willingness to listen and learn from others, to respect their opinions and values, and to seek avenues that connect rather than separate us from others. Taylor says this will be difficult as it will be an effort to mend old wounds and past mistakes, to communicate freely with others – many of whom we don’t like and with whom we disagree – about issues and values, disputes and beliefs, setting aside pre-judgments and negative assumptions about their beliefs, values, or cultural dispositions. This journey, if one is honest and sincere, will be transparent, exposing one’s character and that of others, and requiring reassessing the personal and collective values considered meaningful to one’s life and work. It will be an endeavor of collectively collaborating – giving equal and honest consideration to different views and understandings, and prioritizing values that are vital to personal, communal, or workplace identity.

To classify, abstract, generalize, reduce to uniformities, deduce, calculate and summarize in rigid, timeless formulae is to mistake appearance for reality, describe the surface and leave the depths untouched, break up the living whole by artificial analysis, and misunderstand the processes both of history and of the human soul by applying to them categories which at best can be useful only in dealing with [the physical sciences] and mathematics.

—Isaiah Berlin (2013). *The crooked timber of humanity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Taylor comments,

“Much contemporary moral philosophy ... has given such a narrow focus to morality that some of the crucial connections I want to draw here are incomprehensible in its terms. This moral philosophy has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather than on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance or ... as the privileged focus of attention or will. ... philosophy has accredited a cramped and

truncated view of morality in a narrow sense, as well as of the whole range of issues involved in the attempts to live the best possible life, and this not only among professional philosophers, but with a wider public.”⁷

What Taylor seeks is an affirmation of the ordinary life, the good life, reminding us that “... our *identity* is deeper and more many-sided than any of our possible articulations of it.”⁸ He concluded:

*The notion that the life of production and reproduction, of work and the family, is the main locus of the good life flies in the face of what were originally the dominant distinctions of our civilization. For both the warrior ethic and the Platonic, ordinary life in this sense is part of the lower range, part of what contrasts with the incomparably higher. The affirmation of the ordinary life, therefore, involves a polemical stance towards these traditional views and their implied elitism.*⁹

The Contextual Significance of Authentic Leadership

Considering its dialogical nature, a fitting description for an ethics of authenticity is “humanity as community.” Although self-referential, it is a moral ideal, perhaps a vision, reaching beyond the veil of personal considerations seeking collective and ethical ways to manage life with ethical commitment and purpose. For those adopting an ethical way of living, an ethics of authenticity speaks to *self-identity* as one usually discovers who they are when in relation with others.

One should note that any reference to *self-identity* involves the complexity of understanding social relationships, social interactions, religious commitments, political affiliations, and the like. In an effort to understand another person, that person’s identity cannot be construed too simply or loosely. We often underestimate others, judging them too quickly and inappropriately. People are amazingly complex and resist minimal and undemanding classifications, including overtly or covertly attempts at manipulation.

There are many reasons, people trust and distrust others, commit themselves to certain values, and identify specific activities as important to their lives. Life is not lived in the black and white of

clear-cut categorizations. Thus, within the diversity of our friends and associates, building solid and long-lasting relationships will take time as many are unwilling to discuss their values, even with their closest friends. Whatever “an ethics of authenticity” means, its meaning will always vary and will be interpreted through self-identity—personal values and specific environments. To some, an ethics of authenticity seems a remote idea, complex and weighted with hidden motives and undisclosed agendas. The transparency needed for ethical authenticity to take hold will take time to build and sustain. Authenticity requires an openness and willingness to engage in dialectical conversations; and we can be assured, it doesn’t arrive pre-packaged and ready to install into in a leadership organizational plan.

Conversely, Taylor’s concept of identity refers to what is absent for the person who, in the throes of an identity crisis, finds himself completely without orientation before such questions. Such a person lacks the kind of thing which, for instance, our vegetarian possesses: a space in a background moral horizon contoured by strong evaluations, an identity shaped by an ideal.”

—Smith, Nick (1994). Charles Taylor, “strong hermeneutics and the politics of difference. Radical philosophy.

[https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/charles-taylor-strong-hermeneutics-and-the-politics-of-difference.](https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/charles-taylor-strong-hermeneutics-and-the-politics-of-difference)

Effort, patience, and time are required to develop the trust structures needed and these are always relationship dependent.

The difficulties of this discussion are obvious for surely meaning is lost if it remains conceptual only, abstract and divorced from a significant setting. There is no better place to begin than the realities of present-day America. Indeed, today, perhaps before, American values have been polarized and ethics compressed, casting a shadow on ethics and an ethic of authenticity,¹⁰ making it difficult to discuss values and ethics socially or in a workplace setting. Seemingly, without rudder or anchor we live in the afterglow of Jefferson transformational words,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In the 19th century these words would soon be tempered by capitalistic greed and institutionalized slavery resulting in a civil war. But even war could not wipe clean the prejudices held in the minds of many Americans against people of color. The treatment of people of color and the assumption of “white” privilege and “white supremacy” have been anchors weighing down the moral foundations of American democracy since its inception and effectively used by politicians to leverage their power and influence ever since. Within the workplace, this anchor may not be obvious, but for minorities, especially people of color, it remains a clear and present reality.

And although we can produce evidence showing ethical authenticity is important for business leadership effectiveness as did Copeland or produce philosophical arguments sustaining it as did Taylor, an ethics of authenticity remains today an ethical ideal tempered by racism, discrimination, and ruthless business practices. Maybe it was always a ruse to confuse the unsuspecting; an unrealistic goal held aloft, but knowingly unattainable. Maybe it’s just something to write and think about for those committed to values-based leadership? Copeland’s research assures us that an ethics of authenticity can be useful as an effective business practice, perhaps even in homes and churches. Taylor’s analysis demonstrates its pitfalls and methods leading to its sustainability, but seemingly its glow has been diminished as it expands exponentially though society touched here and there by political capitalism. This we know, and the experiences of the last five or six years testify, an ethics of

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that considers words and thought as tools and instruments for prediction, problem solving, and action, and rejects the idea that the function of thought is to describe, represent, or mirror reality. Pragmatism originated in the United States around 1870, and now presents a growing third alternative to both analytic and ‘Continental’ philosophical traditions worldwide. Its first generation was initiated by the so-called ‘classical pragmatists’ Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who first defined and defended the view, and his close friend and colleague William James (1842–1910), who further developed and ably popularized it.

“Pragmatism,” [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2020. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/.](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/)

authenticity is more than an academic construct or philosophical debate; in some quarters it’s a proven business practice that, in 2021, may have lost its zest and meaning.

The Democratic Ideal

Truly, the nation we so fondly call “America” was in part a creation of the influence of myth and fact, reason and hope, and fear and anxiety. As these cultural forces were overlapping and bumping into one another, the ideal of American democracy was taking shape. Sadly, failing to critically examine the history and foundations of democracy, as well as personal histories, many have construed these idealized stories as “facts,” overlooking their questionable histories and less than ethical moorings. These stories appear in textbooks, advertisements, school and church pageants, holiday celebrations and the like making them seem more factual than they actually are. They have colored our thinking and continue to mold the thinking of our children in a complacent unawareness.

As we are experiencing, when our history becomes more remote it leaves an ever-widening gap to be filled in by old stories and beliefs, ideologies and myths designed to augment our most treasured ideals and manipulate our beliefs and actions. Various told, these stories color how we view the world and interpret present day issues. Covertly they fuel both our moral and immoral judgments with hyperbolic intentions as they enter the mainstream of our thinking. We hear them from parents and grandparents, friends and work associates, ministers, teachers, and politicians. What is left unspoken or just glossed over in amiable ignorance is sometimes puzzling and ever so often doesn’t mesh with the contextual realities in which it originated. Remembering these stories, we more often than not ignore their exaggerations and accept them as fact. These, says A. C. Grayling, “... are so much easier to understand, and provide the neat narrative structure – beginning, middle, end, and purpose – that human psychology loves.”¹¹

As we most assuredly are aware, our myths, which include the veiled assumptions about our genealogical past, cannot be dispelled by facts alone. We have trouble thinking about them rationally because they comprise a great deal of our mental makeup; ***when thinking about them, we are thinking with them.*** They lie quietly within operating in the background of our logic and beliefs as a hidden moral grammar.¹² With emotional force – flags flying, Bibles waving, bands playing, children marching, and with a loud and numbing rhetoric – our myths are convincingly acknowledged; clichés or ordinary life. They help us gain our bearings in a world of confusing ethical message. They are active, perhaps covertly shaping our personal and collective identities, and compressing our values’ orientation – including what is meant by “ethical authenticity”— in an agreeable unawareness. The irony is palpable.

Hobbes argues that man is essentially motivated by a desire for self-preservation. Without a powerful sovereign (leviathan) to hold man in awe, we would live in a constant state of war as we each struggle to protect our persons. In essence, life would be *solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short*. While absolutism may be contrary to our desire for liberty, it is the only thing that will provide us with security.

– Hobbes: <https://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/simpson/hist162/hobbes.pdf>.

Practicality Based on Common Sense

And so, inharmoniously, an ethics of authenticity has been stained; blemished not only by political leaders but church and corporate leaders, friends, community leaders, and family members as well. It has also been impoverished by those who proudly tell “their story,” con-

SIDEBAR DISCUSSION

It is appropriate, if only in a sidebar to this discussion, to call attention to the notion of “pragmatic” or “utilitarian” value existing in the minds of many White-Americans as that of *white privilege*. Historically and socially instilled, *white privilege* has become a *habit of expectation*¹⁵ for many, covertly shielding much of what they “see” or “don’t see,” “hear” or “don’t hear.” Many white Americans who are devoutly religious and obviously ethical will deny this. They have enjoyed the privileges of being “white” all of their lives, view the world and think through a “white” prism.

This is not to say they participate in discriminatory practices; most do not. But, for others, it’s but a short step from this seeming innocuous disposition to feelings of *white supremacy*, which is underscored by racist attitudes and actions. Because many are in denial, trying to correct the long history of racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination will take a change of life that is transformational, transcending the words we use and the lifestyles we enjoy. In the minds of “the least among us,” these attitudes and complacent dispositions will always color the meaning of “an ethics of authenticity.”

Consequently, entrapped in a static mindset, deflecting change and the possibility of positive conversations with others about ethics and values, the roots of prejudice and discrimination are hardly noticed as they lie deeply embedded in many white Americans as *practicality based on common sense*. With “reason” now being portrayed as “being reasonable” or as “common sense,” this goes down much easier. And when our values are aligned with a majority of like-minded individuals, our identity is secured.

Habitually, the hope of moral reconciliation goes unnoticed — perhaps it is simply neglected — as it is often lost in the common and ordinary events of everyday life. Many believe it does not pertain to them; it’s always “the other person’s fault.” Yet, within in the existential marrow of time and place, there have been and are the courageous few who, seeking social and moral equity, speak and act out. They “see” the broader picture of American history and the unethical and immoral practices requiring change, but what they think of as socially and political important is frequently ignored or just vanishes in the loud and angry voices of those with dissimilar views.

Ignorant of the past and its value correlations, and desensitized to present anomalies, many are apt to say, maybe even frustratingly, “That’s just the way things are,” or “It is what it is.” Others may unwittingly think “This is the way it ought to be.” Thus, in communities and in workplaces, socially insecure and afraid of being ostracized by friends and work associates, many have retreated into the safety of saying nothing or retreating into the light and airy environment of sports, entertainment, etc. — as Robert Frost said, “Listen, they murmur talking in the dark on what should be their daylong theme continued.” Ignorance becomes a safe haven for those who wish not to engage in mending the so-called “American philosophy.” Being dialogical in nature, an ethics of authenticity will always be a work in progress and hampered by self-denial.

A disquieting fog has moved over the American moral landscape. Coupled with fear and uncertainty, many have reacted negatively, others positively, and sadly, some not at all. All of this will probably continue for some time to come. But we should garnish our hope and remember Baier’s words, “...the best possible life for everybody cannot be achieved in isolation.”

Maybe I’m an optimist, but it seems that the currents are shifting and a fresh breeze is blowing. Yet, I am also reminded of the pain and suffering of Americans who have struggled and fought to bring the ideal of democracy forward, who have been ethically authentic and witnessed the lack of integrity and rectitude of others. Undergirding the ideal of democracy is an ethics of authenticity which can never be taken for granted. This is something our generation and those who come after us cannot let slip into the murky waters of indefinable values, one issue ethics, and be henceforth diluted by narcissistic leaders with an uncontrollable desire for self-promotion, wealth, and power at any cost.

cealing motives, or who have sequestered their ethics and go along to get along supporting the notion that ethics is a private affair.

And, as we have witnessed, many are susceptible to a herd mentality making ethics little more than an exaggerated emotional reaction to events and issues. Our ethics is thus moved forward in a noncognitive chain of reactions, each building on the other without coherent cause or reason. Consequently, variously positioned and confusing, our ethical acuity has become encrusted with mind-numbing rhetoric – and unacknowledged assumptions, some moral, some not—as it bullies its way through family and social gatherings, political meetings, and through local, state, and national halls of government. Thus, when recommendations are made to apply an ethics of authenticity to business or community leadership practices, many are suspect and unbelieving making leadership acuity difficult to sustain.

There are several clues to this dilemma and difficult to define. They're not only found in the uneasy balance of faith and reason emanating from the Euro-centric Enlightenment, but in the seemingly innocuous mantle of a pragmatic philosophy¹³ – as Taylor says, “a problem leaking into our time”— and touted generally as “The American Philosophy” with its call to arms, “the greatest good for the greatest number.” As a “practical” philosophy, pragmatism has mass appeal and utility value and is sometimes defined as “*practicality based on common sense.*” Yet, definitively lacking any moral content, it's easily appropriated for amoral as well as moral purposes. After all, who is to say “what is the greatest good” and “who comprises that ethereal quantity, the greatest number”?

Under the guise of pragmatism, what works – ethical or unethical – more often than not is given legitimacy and priority. *Its context locates its value and its appeal lies in its flexibility.* Business leaders and politicians must be pragmatic to make “things work,” but it's the “how” and “why” of this process that easily ignores the ethical – the honest, fair, and moral – when under pressure to succeed. Pragmatism has the potential of leaving an ethics of authenticity in the scum of politics and narcissistic business practices as an ideal having no practical value or, at best, just something ethically positive to tangle in front of an unsuspecting group with less than ethical intentions. Contextualism and history are important and to this we should give our attention as we pursue an ethics of authenticity and make an endeavor to validate its meaning.

As America became the center of scientific and industrial achievement, the *utility of reason* was promoted as common sense and pragmatic, as it was, but *uniquely moral it was not.* “Utility” as pragmatism or *utilitarianism* has a tendency to float in the corrosive air of personal and political expediency, backroom politics, and unethical business practices. As such, utility, when aligned with an ill-defined hope that whatever is deemed by the majority as important, will hopefully morph into what Dewey called “human flourishing”—the best kind of life a person can live.¹⁴

Like “authenticity,” Dewey's “human flourishing” has been appropriated by both the ethical and unethical; at best, it is a utilitarian ethic, and a “*morality*” *by coincidence*, lacking the personal and collective intentionality a deep moral view demands.

Overlooked is that “the greatest good for the greatest number” has undergone a gradual transformation or redefinition and is now understood, broadly, as “the greatest good for those who control America's wealth.” This is a reality hidden by mass rallies and

sloganeering. It is also a hidden philosophy that has undergirded much of politics in American history. In broad strokes, utilitarianism and the subjective relativism it has spawned has done its job as the small percentage of Americans who control America's politics and economy are the hidden "majority" promoted by a utilitarian logic. What is apparent, but dismissed by the powerful and influential, is that Dewey's ideal of "human flourishing" – when looking through the eyes of ordinary people, especially minorities – takes on a different and unexpected meaning and so does an ethics of authenticity.

Robert Frost spoke about the American condition in his poem, "A Cabin in the Clearing":

Smoke

They must by now have
learned the native tongue.
Why don't they ask the Red Man where they are?

Mist

They often do, and none the wiser for it.
So do they also ask philosophers
Who come to look in on them from the pulpit.
They will ask anyone there is to ask –
In the fond faith accumulated fact
Will of itself take fire and light the world up.
Learning has been a part of their religion.

Smoke

If the day ever comes when they know who they are,
They may know better where they are.
But who they are is too much to believe
Either for them or the on looking world.
They are too sudden to be credible.¹⁶

Values Clashes and the Development of Moral Awareness

The questionable business practices of the 19th century's industrial barons and, in the 20th century, hotbed issues such as feminism, integration, racial discrimination, same-sex

To understand what led to the culture wars of the late 1980s and 90s, one must understand the radical shift in the American political landscape in the 1960s. The sixties gave birth to the New Left who were white Americans that were both young and affluent. There were hundreds of these American youths who voiced dissatisfaction with the promise of American life. Inspired by the civil rights movement and radicalized by the Vietnam War, they committed themselves to leftist activism of one sort or another. This form of counter culturalism was not only a response to the conservative approach that dominated much of America in the twentieth century, but it was also, as author Andrew Hartman put it, an 'effort to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new aesthetic forms, new personal identities, on the far side of politics, the bourgeois home, and the Protestant work ethic.' The New Left's emphasis towards racial and social movements such as antiwar, Black Power, feminist, and gay liberation were increasingly being incorporated into mainstream America, a fact that conservative Americans would acknowledge as a major threat. The clash, the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. https://www.fgcu.edu/aquila/repository/the_culture_wars.pdf.

marriage, homosexual inclusion, the immigration crisis, and now the emergence of white supremacy groups (in many forms), have brought American ethical beliefs into contact

revealing their tensions, differences, and potential violent interactions. Native Americans were early on caught up in this transactional mentality and even today are thought of by some as merely by-products of conquest and the movement of civilization. In terms of an *ethic of utility*, they are thought of as having no practical value and pragmatically, nonhuman.

Ethically disengaged and horizontally oriented how easily it is to forget the past and redefine the present, as some have said, “In our own image.” This is an egocentric predicament infectious to our lives and ethics, but it is more: it is deeply cultural, an ethnocentric anomaly floating tenuously through the heavy air of 21st century America and effectively redefining what is meant by Dewey’s notion of “human flourishing” and Taylor’s “an ethics of authenticity.” The culture wars of 1980s and 1990s have not gone away but have been resurrected by political and militant forces in the 21st century clearly tainting what is meant by “ethics” and “authenticity.” Many of the present-day right-wing movements and their left-wing political adversaries can be directly linked to this unsettled time. They have polarized our thinking and standardized our response, but, as Frost said, we are “none the wiser for it.”

Reconsiderations

Maybe “authenticity” has always been an abstract concept, an unattainable ideal lost in the morass of ethical rhetoric and philosophical theory. Even so, given the tenor of our time, a fresh look is needed and should be context specific. Mary Kay Copeland’s empirical and practical analysis and philosophers like Charles Taylor are important because they challenge us to pause, think, reconsider, and even re-commit ourselves to ethical authenticity’s vision. Recommended is searching for an inclusive ethic – listening to the moral voice within – that does justice to shared opinions and, guided by hope and introspective transparency, utilizes the power of reassessment as a catalyst for dialogical healing.

But courage will be needed. Being morally authentic is more than following a set of ethical guidelines, either in one’s business or in one’s life. At its very core, being morally authentic is an activity intentionally undertaken; it is a reconciling journey of healing one’s own troubled

Morality is narrowly concerned with what we ought to do, and not also with what is valuable in itself, or what we should admire or love.... The idea that moral thought should concern itself with our different visions of the qualitatively higher, with strong goods, is never mooted. Awareness of their place in our moral lives has been so deeply suppressed that the thought never seems to occur to many of our contemporaries.
—Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 84.

soul and reaching out and beyond self to families, friends, work associates, and into the community to uplift others, mending past mistakes, and seeking a more universal moral horizon. As Taylor says,

it is not only a narrow seeking of what it is good to do, but a life-time effort of discovery – a seeking of the morally best kind of life to live, of *what it’s good to be*. An ethics of authenticity speaks to our character, the moral depth and quality of our living with each other.

Too much we accept at face value without reassessing the *assumptions* veiling the conclusions reached or the behaviors recommended, or without a careful look at the historical context in which an idea, issue, or problem arose. With faith in dialogical civility

and with moral resolve and working together in an amiable exchange of views, the often thoughtless beliefs driving our thinking can be unearthed and reassessed as we purposefully build families, organizations, and communities that are ethically sensitive and morally aware. We can begin by asking, “What is this ‘greatest good’ which utilitarians promote as ethical, and what about those who are left is the scum of ‘the least among us?’” “How does this apply to my business or my community involvement?” “How and by what means can I help?” “What can WE do?” and “How can WE bring the powerful and influential change-makers into this process.” Giving consideration to these questions – from a moral perspective – will give new meaning to the phrase “the greatest good for the greatest number” while enriching our interpretation of “ethical authenticity.”

Morality seems to have moved “inside,” perhaps becoming more defensive (protective of self) than overtly expressed, and also becoming not only individualistic and subjective, but dogmatic and unchanging while clinging to the safety of a group and expressing a herd mentality. Consequently, with insecurity and confusion, we hear many saying, “I have my values and you have your values and that’s just the way it is; end of discussion.” Many are confounded about the hyperbole surrounding the idea of “the American dream and the American way.” They are confused and tired of being manipulated. Of course, many are frightened by honest dialogue about their essential values, not wanting to explore, perhaps self-reflectively, their own moral identity or to be queried about their beliefs. Maybe they just distrust what others are saying. So they retreat, seeking emotional and mental relief, into themselves or a like-minded group not wanting to be disturbed by contrary views or be pressured into inserting a wedge between themselves and others.

This everyday situation carries over into the workplace, into community meetings, and into everyday conversations. It perhaps causes a shifting of stools at a local bar or finding others with whom to associate, ignoring old friends, eating alone at lunch, and seeking out the like-minded with whom our essential values are in agreement. It is also causing families to disengage in meaningful conversations over meals and during holidays. Many, perhaps most, unwilling to disturb others or risk criticism or even violence, just leave things as they are. This also prevents leaders in organizations, who are concerned about associates and employees as “persons,” from entering into conversation with them about values that matter, subsequently diminishing an ethic of authenticity.

Again, Robert Frost observes:

Mist

I don’t believe the sleepers in this house know where they are.

Smoke

They’ve been here long enough to push the woods back from around the house and part them in the middle with a path.

Mist

And still I doubt if they know where they are and I begin to fear they never will. All they maintain the path for is the comfort of visiting with the equally bewildered. Nearer in plight their neighbors than distance.¹⁷

Questions Will Not Go Away

Enlightenment thinkers faced criticism and worse as they made an effort to provide new

Authenticity does involve a personal aspect; an individual's own created or discovered – not imposed – orientation toward life. But, says [Charles] Taylor, true authenticity also involves a recognition of and an openness to what he calls “horizons of significance – certain larger contexts within which humans move. These contexts might include respect for and benevolence toward others and toward the natural world. They provide a sense of personal connection with a larger political, social, or religious source of meaning.

<https://www.enotes.com/topics/ethics-authenticity>

insights into the nature of knowledge, the human mind, and ethics. Some were condemned by the powers of the church and the political leaders the church controlled. Some abdicated and others moved to more enlightened countries. They sought to release their thinking from past dogmatism and

authority, a release many are seeking today. But, as we know, dogmatic, antidemocratic, and unethical views are often wrapped in attractive packages, appealing to our base instincts and not to our “better angels.” Consequently, seeking the security of like-minded persons we conscientiously avoid those who differ with us. Frequently ensnared by *homogenized thinking*, the echoes we hear have perhaps caused a certain numbing of our ethical sensitivity. Such thinking is highly susceptible to a mob mentality, a dangerous phenomenon and descriptive of much of political chatter in 2020-21. But it is understandable; there is safety in numbers.¹⁸

Robert Frost concludes:

Mist

Listen, they murmur talking in the dark on what should be their daylong theme continued. Putting the lamp out has not put their thought out. Let us pretend the dewdrops from the eaves are you and I eavesdropping on their unrest – a mist and smoke eavesdropping *on a haze* and see if we can tell the bass from the soprano.”¹⁹

Groupthink and standardized thinking seem a natural part of us, so unsurprisingly we hardly notice it. We were challenged by our Enlightenment forefathers, but standardized thinking would not go quietly into the night. As the 19th century drew to a close, John Dewey’s²⁰ “cultural naturalism” would morph into utilitarianism and put standardized reason at the forefront of education creating an *epistemological haze*. The conclusions of Enlightenment thinkers were now being reinterpreted, simplified, codified, and accepted as the hallmark of truth and meaning. Statistical correlation, with positive and negative values factored in and easily manipulated, would come to dominate both “truth” and “fact” leaving their “interpretation” to qualified experts who would then explain and justify their conclusions. Statistics now became the hallmark of both empirical and rational dialogue unwittingly bending to the subjective assumptions of utilitarian logic.²¹

Thus installed, utilitarian thinking, with its “greatest good for the greatest number” mantle and interpreted statistically, became the go to solution for educational, political, and community leaders and planners. It was not until the reactions of thinkers called “postmoderns” that the chains of authoritarianism and the widely accepted solutions to ethical and moral problems were *slightly* loosened. Making many uneasy, postmodernism may have unwittingly reinforced the single-minded views and solutions of the past,

dogmatically stated, and effectively decreasing hope for a dialectical exchange of ideas. This was true in the parlors of educational decision-makers who continued to judge teaching and learning through the taxonomy of statistically-based test scores; it was especially true among the clergy who, already threatened by the secular climate of the 21st century, began to label postmodern thinkers as the coming of the “antichrist.”²² Certainly, a moral haze seems to have settled over the American cultural landscape, but some continue to talk – “Putting the lamp out has not put their thought out.”

Conclusion

Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address was delivered on Monday, March 4, 1861. Desperately wishing to avoid this terrible conflict, Lincoln ended with this impassioned plea:

*I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.*²³

“It is not enough that I cautiously risk my life to prevent [a crime]; if it happens, and if I was there, and if I survive where the other is killed, I know from a voice within myself. I am guilty of being still alive.”

—Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*
Fordham University Press; 2nd edition (September 1, 2001).

Avi Lifschitz reconsiders the changing meanings of the Enlightenment, both to those who created it and those historians who have since attempted to define it saying,

*Kant’s essay of 1784, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ opens with the statement ‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity’. This is a plea for independent thinking, as expressed in his call ‘dare to know’ (sapere aude). It was a plea to break the bonds of religious belief and mythology that had dominated Europe for many hundreds of years and turn to scientific and rational thinking that he believed would become the engines of progress. Kant saw his own time as a not yet enlightened age, but rather an age of enlightenment. According to this view, the Enlightenment might well still be a work in progress.*²⁴

Consequently, achieving perspective on authentic leadership as a type of values-based leadership leaves open the question implied by Kant: “Is the Enlightenment process still moving forward or has it been high-jacked by those with dissimilar motives moving us to reconsider the nature of ethics and value, especially the idea of ‘ethical authenticity’ as impractical?” Our reconsiderations lead to Kant’s concern and parenthetically to a concern expressed by Charles Taylor: “Do we have beliefs and values that have lured us into limited thinking, unexamined assumptions, and narcissistic behaviors about ourselves and our relationships with others?”²⁵ As our values have been politicized, capitalized, and institutionalized, authentic leadership sways in the balance.

Yet, there is hope, for, as Taylor reminds us, “We are embodied agents, living in dialogical conditions, inhabiting time in a specifically human way, that is, making sense of our lives as a story that connects the past from which we have come to our future projects.”²⁶ Perhaps Taylor was being idealistic, and maybe some of us have joined with his idealism, but he

understood that our ideals and visions, and especially our capacity for moral discernment, are the engineers of moral veracity. Even more so is the courage to lead families, schools and businesses, governmental and financial bodies ethically and transformationally and engage in value-focused dialogues. Kant challenged his contemporaries, as we ought to be challenged, *to dare to know and take the risk of discovery, exercise reflective criticism, and accept the responsibilities of freedom and autonomy*, to affirm what Taylor calls “the affirmation of ordinary life.”

This affirmation acknowledges our intrinsic moral worth and that no standards, commandments, or constitutions – regardless of their origin – are able to coerce morality out of immorality or excite a narcissistic person, corporation, or nation to abandon innate self-interests. The existential reality is that our *inner haze* is not so easily brushed away. Achieving ethical authenticity, even in the broadest sense, asks that we maintain the possibility that people can change; that we, and those in our immediate environment, are able to renew the moral sensitivities lying naturally within ourselves in a reconciling journey to a moral norm that is universally participatory. Although no moral doctrine is needed to recognize the depth of human worth or need, perhaps a moral vision is required for individuals and nations to do something about it. This vision can be labeled as “an ethics of authenticity” revealing our existential obligations to others in reconciling behaviors.

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