

Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Human Existence

Brian Braman

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In the introduction to *Meaning and Authenticity*, Brian Braman identifies as a prevalent cultural and philosophical problem the question of authenticity, or “whether we are indeed what we claim to be.” (58) Yet, this succinct book is not another interpretive reading of the usual authenticity suspects—the Romantics and the Existentialists—nor of the Frankfurt school and post-Heideggerians who drove the topic out of vogue in the mid-20th century. What makes Braman’s project unusual is his juxtaposition of two philosophers who are rarely considered together, comparing them on a topic for which neither is particularly well-known: Charles Taylor, one of Canada’s foremost philosophers, and Bernard Lonergan, a theologian with a small but devoted following. Both authors have something to say about authenticity, but the point of convergence is a Catholic orientation to ethics rather than a shared perspective on something like ontology. Braman’s book is divided into four chapters: the first explains the influential account of authenticity given by Heidegger in *Being and Time*, the middle two deal with each of the focus-authors in turn, and the fourth presents some comparison of Taylor and Lonergan.

Taylor is famous for his sweeping study of modern culture in *Sources of the Self* (1989), but delivers his most protracted musings on authenticity in the slim volume, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991), which is much less a solution to a personal identity puzzle than it is a critique of moral relativism and the culture of narcissism. Taylor insists on the necessity of devoting one’s life to a self-transcending cause or norm. Lonergan discusses authenticity in the context of theology and moral obligation. He promotes five ethical imperatives, which if followed properly and consistently, are supposed to bring about authenticity: be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, and be loving. Both Taylor and Lonergan diverge considerably from the Heideggerian account that is proposed as a backdrop, because Heidegger is concerned exclusively with the being of human beings, or “fundamental ontology.” The fact that neither author really wrestles with the problem of how to be oneself dogs Braman’s book in which he travels in concentric circles around an expected explanation of personal authenticity that never materialises. He

concludes on the penultimate page that “progress results from our being our true selves,” yet there has been little prior discussion of what it means actually to separate the “true” self from potential “false” interlopers. (98) Instead, Braman treats the quest for the authentic self as an ultimately religious experience akin to the quest for God, which is precisely what one would expect to find in Lonergan. Taylor, too, inflects his arguments with the religious, but not sufficiently for Braman, who favours Lonergan’s view because it is unabashedly religious, whereas Taylor’s is only “implicitly moral and religious.” (98)

A comparison between Taylor and Lonergan is Braman’s stated destination. The final chapter, “Dialogue and Dialectic,” contrasts the two thinkers with respect to several axes of inquiry that illuminate some of their similarities and differences: art, cognitional theory, and the human good. While there is an element of the dialogical in this comparison, I would not call it “dialectic”; this would imply that the two authors are somehow meaningfully opposed, yet complementary, to one another. On the contrary, Taylor and Lonergan overlap a good deal while remaining independent of one another. Lonergan’s account is correctly identified as the more thorough and specific one, but it seems to win Braman’s greater admiration at least as much by dint of its religiosity. Braman approvingly summarises Lonergan’s view as follows: “Falling in love with God is the fulfillment of what it means to be an authentic human being.” (69) Both supporters and detractors of the authenticity project in the 20th century would balk at this conclusion.

Braman is not unaware of the great scepticism with which many philosophers have approached authenticity. Some of the critiques of authenticity presented by the likes of Theodor Adorno are boldly stated in the Introduction and then hardly pursued. Braman skims over the devastating critiques of Heidegger to which his authors were reacting and declares that they “take seriously the...criticism of postmodernity” and triumph over it, without explaining how this is so. (7) For instance, to Adorno’s trenchant concern about the abstractness and pseudo-religiosity (or “aura”) any discussion of authenticity, Braman implies that Taylor’s and Lonergan’s accounts of authenticity escape this critique because they appeal to *actual* religiosity and specific religious commandments. Braman declares, siding with Lonergan, that “doing what is truly good finds its proper fulfillment in an act of love that finds itself expressed in families and communities, and in the response to the divine ground’s over-

whelming love that floods our hearts.” (59) Whatever the merits of this type of explanation, it hardly diffuses Adorno’s worry about concretising the meaning of authenticity.

Similarly, the threat of moral relativism and subjectivism, which Braman claims his authors skilfully circumvent, emerges all the more poignantly in his recounting of their views. In both cases, he says, authenticity is based on “inner conviction” (98)—a red flag for anyone concerned with substantiating an abstract term and escaping subjectivism. In Taylor, the attainment of authenticity depends on a non-descript “epiphany” whereby I come to be “moved” by some external good. This idea may have intuitive appeal, but only buttresses the view that the good and, consequently, authenticity, is subjective. Nonetheless Braman asserts that “the notion of a framing epiphany overcomes the relativism...of human reason.” (44) In Lonergan, meanwhile, authenticity happens “each time the person decides for what is truly worthwhile, what is truly good versus what is apparently good.” (66) Far from escaping it, Lonergan in fact ironically reprises the ungrounded decisionism and radical subjectivism of the French existentialists which were so maligned by later critics. Braman gives insufficient consideration to these tensions; he is strongly approving of Taylor and Lonergan without always acknowledging the strengths of their critics.

If one is to split hairs, there are also questionable uses of certain technical and translated terminology. For example, Braman uses “hermeneutic” or “empirical” when he appears to mean “phenomenological,” a move that obscures the significance of the “hermeneutic circle” that he mentions repeatedly; and, contrary to convention in Heidegger scholarship, he sometimes translates “*Angst*” as “dissolution,” and “*eigenste*” as “own most” (rather than “ownmost”), arguably botching the meaning of these key words. In part, these technicalities result from Braman’s choice of secondary sources, which are mostly selected from the fields of theological studies and Lonergan studies rather than from prominent mainstream historians of philosophy. There is nothing *ipso facto* objectionable about turning to a specific—even unconventional—literature for background, but perhaps Braman should be more forthcoming about his perspective.

Even as a secondary source lacking much critical analysis, there is of course something interesting and potentially valuable to be learned in this review of Lonergan’s and Taylor’s views on authenticity. While

it is clear that Lonergan's values are, for him, unachievable without faith in God, there is plenty of room for discussion of these virtues in more pluralistic terms, as well as of their relationship to personal identity and fulfillment. Taylor, meanwhile, has done more than almost any recent philosopher to stimulate discussion of the self in ethical and intersubjective terms. Taylor, Braman explains, "ends up grounding his notion of authenticity and his analysis of human intentionality in our common heritage. This social teleology is the horizon in which one finds one's ideal of authenticity." (86) Taylor is thus careful to evade the charges of solipsism and amorality that plagued some of his forerunners, and is able to champion ethical self-fulfillment in a society without a monolithic religion or moral code. Indeed, contrary to Braman's intuition, these pluralistic features of Taylor's thought make him far more instructive than Lonergan to many students of philosophy.

Meaning and Authenticity achieves some of what it sets out to do: it summarises and compares Taylor and Lonergan with a nod to Heidegger, even if it falls short of establishing a groundbreaking dialogue between them. Braman's project is interesting, but would perhaps be better executed under a different banner. The focus is not quite, as advertised, "whether we are what we claim to be," but to oversimplify, whether we believe in things that are bigger than ourselves. Ultimately, the metaphysical questions are deferred in favour of the ethical-religious, with the two featured authors providing different accounts of how to transcend oneself for the sake of some non-subjective good. Braman's explanation of these accounts poses more philosophical questions about the nature of the self than it resolves. *Meaning and Authenticity* may have limited appeal to a wider philosophical audience because of its marked departure from the traditional concerns that characterise most philosophical discussions of authenticity. Braman's uncritical approach to a religiously informed theory of ethics is a reasonable introduction to the thought of Taylor and Lonergan, but does little to advance scholarship on the problem of the self and how we ought to live.

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