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Authenticity as a Task

Do you often find yourself saying that you *had* to do something? In making decisions, do you metaphorically let go of the steering wheel, leaving things up to fate, providence, or destiny? Have you ever acted not because you consciously chose to, but rather because you followed the crowd, simply wanted to fit in, or took shortcuts? Have you, after navigating endless twists and dead-ends in the laby-

rinth of life's choices, willingly given up your freedom, submitting to whatever principles, ideologies, or people seemed most convincing at the moment?

If you answered "yes" to even one of these questions, it means you understand what losing authenticity means in the deepest existential sense. This occurs precisely when we start to deny the truth of our own liberty, trying to fool the world and ourselves that we



A Thousand Years of Solitude
by Natasha Mirak,
oil on canvas, schlagmetal,
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quite simply *have* to do something. Yet, the truth is that in most situations in life, it's easier to have to do something than to be at liberty to do something. Sound paradoxical? Let me explain.

In the philosophy of existence, sometimes also called *existentialism*, freedom is one of the most important concepts for any meaningful description of human existence. However, it immediately becomes wrapped up in a dispute, or perhaps we should say, in a certain tension with necessity – into which existence is inherently woven, as it inevitably faces temporal limitations. In other words, humans are subject to necessity as mortal beings, and death is the ultimate point of reference, regardless of human will. Here we can mention Kant's concept of reconciling two different orders within the rational subject: the freedom of intellect and the necessity of nature, entailing constant tension between choice (what can be chosen) and law (especially moral law). However, I do not wish to stray too far from the solutions proposed by existential philosophers, whose way of describing freedom is closely linked to the concept of authenticity.

In his introduction to the compilation volume *Filozofia egzystencjalna* [Existential Philosophy], the prominent Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski wrote: "Saying 'I am my own freedom' does not mean that we have reasons to find in the empirically considered psychological human subject any mysterious gaps or margins escaping the law" (1965, 17) Freedom here is not synonymous with anomie or arbitrariness. It is not about breaking rules, nor is it a notion in the realm of psychology – a subjective, psychological feeling of freedom. It is, instead, "the inalienable situation of being, constituted by this very turning towards oneself" (19).

Authenticity, in this sense, would be self-reference, a continuous movement of searching within oneself for the basis of all actions and decisions. The awareness of death is key here and it cannot be fabricated – neither in its finality, nor in its terror. We have no

escape from the intrinsically contradictory situation, where the only invariable element of life itself is life's very antithesis. This places humans in a constant ambivalence, combining radical dissent and humble acceptance. According to Søren Kierkegaard, the reason we lapse into inauthenticity is the fear of death, which leads us to make mostly futile attempts to impose the order of the divine, transcendent infinity into individual, human finitude. Such attempts are doomed to fail, carrying with them the absurdity characteristic of religion, which can only be accepted on condition that the subject manages to transcend its limitations and make a leap into faith. However, this requires the suspension, or perhaps even, as frightening as it sounds, the rejection of ethics. Authentic religious existence, being a gift and a challenge, is above all a grace and none of the purposive structures of rationality apply to it.

Champions of faith, however, are not often encountered. More often, we encounter people who squander their relationship with themselves by falsifying their existence. This is because we fear infinity, the abyss into which no one likes to peer. According to Kierkegaard or Jaspers, God exists in eternity, and transcendence is what makes it possible to overcome the absurdity of existence. But for Jean-Paul Sartre, the very assumption of the possibility of an immortal soul is inauthentic. Such an assumption is enough to nullify our here-and-now, to lift the burden from our freedom, which, apart from its positive aspect, manifested as "freedom to," also has its negative aspect, i.e., "freedom from." Moreover, the reverse of freedom is responsibility, which in the immediacy of experience (also moral) is not really lifted from us by any higher power. In this context, authenticity would be the virtue of realizing the possibility of making unconditioned choices.

You don't *have* to do anything, there is no fate, no reason – you are you. And no one is better than you at finding your way in this labyrinth. ■

Here and Now
by Natasza Mirak,
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