

# **Authenticity, Autonomy and Altruism: Keys for Transformation**

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### Abstract

*The value of authentic knowing, autonomous behavior and altruistic motivation is presented. Authenticity, autonomy and altruism are primary human capacities and keys for individual and collective transformation. Realizing the full development of these three basic potentialities can serve as goals and standards for well-being. Authenticity, autonomy and altruism are described, ways of developing them explored and their role in relationships and classrooms discussed.*

Development is the process of potentiality becoming actuality. Helping people achieve their potential to find a measure of success in school, life and society is a primary goal of education. This paper will briefly explore authenticity, autonomy and altruism as three essential basic skills or capacities for developing human potential and creating healthy relationships and societies. Authenticity refers to genuineness and truth, autonomy to moral decisions and actions, and altruism to love and selflessness. How can we through conscious effort, training and experience develop these qualities?

These basic human capacities seek expression in life. We can either encourage or discourage them to develop. When these capabilities are misdirected, perverted, frustrated or harmed in any way, healthy growth and development are impeded. When they are properly used and developed, they become keys for transformation of the individual, community and institutions of society.

Authenticity, autonomy and altruism, as fundamental aspects of human potential, can serve as overarching goals for education that can guide and inform all aspects of the educational process. As we grow in competence, we are able to take increasing responsibility for our own and others development. As we come to know the truth more clearly, develop the capacity to act as responsible independent moral agents more effectively and selflessly serve the greatest good more completely, we transform our worlds and ourselves. Unfortunately, these ideals are not dominant in most cultures, worldviews and institutions today.

According to our capacity, we should strive to reach the highest levels of authenticity, autonomy and altruism. As we do, we approach the Greek ideals of truth, goodness and beauty, and are better able to deal effectively with our world. Those who stay centered in selfishness, ignorance and dependence will not progress to the freedom and happiness for which they are capable. They will be disaffected, create problems for themselves and others and lead lives that are not very challenging, satisfying or fulfilling.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity is a complicated concept and has been understood and interpreted in many different ways (Cooper, 1998; Hatcher, 1994). Used here, authenticity relates to the validity, genuineness or truth of something, especially in knowing and being your true self. When our true selves interact with the world as it really is rather than how we perceive it, we can have an authentic relationship with reality. However, our perceptions of reality and self determine our actions and motivations, not reality. Our perceptions of the cause and effect relationships between our outer and inner environments are never fully reality-based. Consequently, we must make adjustments to attain

greater clarity and authenticity in our relationships with the world, especially the complex world of other people.

We can correct learning based on ineffective, limited or wrong information, motives or behaviors as we modify, refine and clarify our erroneous understandings, feelings and actions in productive ways. Developing new knowledge, skills, qualities and dispositions through questioning, meditation, reflection, consultation, analyzing, comparing, contrasting, evaluating, peer review, scientific thinking, selflessness, detachment and spiritual inquiry are essential to authenticity.

All of these qualities require training, self-discipline and a disposition towards independent investigation of truth using our senses, reason, acquired knowledge, inspiration and intuition as avenues for uncovering greater certainty. Balancing and harmonizing science and religion can help realize greater clarity and authenticity.

### **Autonomy**

Autonomy is the condition where one can think and do for oneself, but this can only be truly developed in an interdependent, interconnected and diversified community (Freire, 1972; Dewey, 1939, 1958). Autonomy, the capacity to make moral decisions and act on them, develops gradually over years. An autonomous nation and person is able to self-govern. Autonomy requires training, controlling and disciplining our emotions, impulses, desires, passions, reactions and minds. The healthy awareness, development, regulation and understanding of these forces can help us direct their influence in beneficial ways.

Though autonomy is sometimes thought of as individualistic and competitive, it is not (Bleazby, 2005). The excessive individualism and competition found in modern society are destructive to self and society, and are antithetical to true and productive autonomy, which requires healthy interdependence.

Kant felt that an autonomous person would act morally independent of external rewards according to the categorical imperative, "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (1993, p. 30). Such action constitutes the essence of well being, happiness and dignity and is a standard for autonomy: "True and enduring happiness results only from genuine moral autonomy" (Hatcher, 1998, p. 39).

We cultivate autonomy as we set authentic and altruistic goals; strive for noble purposes; manage and direct internal and external forces; avoid harmful activities and develop high resolve, sense of purpose, personal capability, self-esteem and an internal locus of control. These qualities are similar to those of Maslow's self-actualization, which are illustrative of aspects of autonomy. Maslow's self-actualization is a state of self-fulfillment, self-control and reaching full human potential: "Self Actualization is the intrinsic growth what is already in the organism, or more accurately, of what the organism is of" (cited in Rad, 2010, p. 37).

### **Altruism**

Altruism is selflessness, acting for the good of others without regard to rewards or benefits. It has

been a core virtue in most societies and religions, serving as a positive force to hold groups, societies and civilization together and promote well being and human potential. Altruism relates closely to other terms used in science, religion and philosophy such as love, compassion, care, prosocial behavior, positive regard, benevolence and agape (Oord, 2007). The term altruism tends to be used more in science, whereas religion is likely to refer to this same concept as love. Especially in its more spiritual connotations, it is associated with having a higher purpose in life, purity of motive, faith, hope, charity and sincerity.

Altruism is internally felt and motivated, but can be seen and measured to some degree in brain imaging and people's behaviors and actions. Many identify altruism or love as a universal law, the key virtue and a touchstone of well being, spirituality and meaning. As a foundational quality, it is related to patience, forgiveness, compassion, tolerance and cooperation but it cannot be reduced singularly to any of these or other related ideas. As we love and do for others, forgetting our selfish interests and ourselves, we find happiness, sense of purpose and wellbeing. The paradox that seems to be supported by both religion and science is that truly loving and taking care of others is the best way to love and care for our own selves (Post, 2007). As explained by Toner in his classic on love, it sets us free and affects all our capacities, including authenticity and autonomy (1968).

### **Developing Authenticity, Autonomy and Altruism**

Authenticity, autonomy and altruism involve cognitive, conative and affective factors for their development. They are also intricately related to the ideals and virtues found in philosophy and religion and lead to a higher and more sustaining purpose and motivation. As we acquire healthy altruistic love, authentic knowledge and autonomous will, we gain in capacity, courage and motivation that manifest itself in truth, unity and service, which in turn release increased mental, emotional and physical energy. When valued, achievable, positive and authentic goals and opportunities for growth are present, effort and motivation are increased.

Mission, purpose and goals direct our energy towards the things we value and give meaning to life. The more we appreciate, comprehend, value and consciously work towards our intentions, the more likely we are to achieve them. Some individuals, communities and institutions have negative, selfish, individualistic or materialistic values, which limit true well-being, happiness and potentiality. We unfold our potentialities as we identify and exploit authentic and altruistic learning opportunities; are attracted to choices that increase autonomy; and are active, self-regulating and positively directed in these processes.

It is good to have a defining and long-term noble purpose, such as becoming more authentic, autonomous and altruistic, but it is helpful to actualize it through several specific short-term goals and objectives so growth can be seen, measured and built upon. By assessing and reflecting upon our progress at each stage in the process, we can alter or adjust our aspirations as we gain more perspective. Our accomplishments, goals and successes encourages a cycle of continuing progress.

Extrinsic motivators, rewards and punishments, though sometimes needed and useful, are limited and can actually hinder motivation, especially if someone is already intrinsically and altruistically motivated. We should move away from dependence on outside influences toward more autonomous, authentic and altruistic choices and motivation. Doing so will boost volition, inspiration and

understanding. As we comprehend cause and effect relationships better, we can make choices that optimize our happiness and welfare, take charge of our own transformation and realize our potential with increased effort, mastery and courage. Once in motion, momentum tends to keep us moving. The more conscious, deliberate and proactive we become, the more likely we are able to keep growing.

Blind imitation and obedience are destructive to the individual and society. We are to know from our own knowledge, see with our own eyes and act from our own hearts, not through others. We must learn to understand, develop and use our talents, interest, capabilities, environments and opportunities to society's benefit. As we know ourselves better, accept ourselves, trust ourselves and actualize our potentialities, we can better help others know, accept, trust and realize their capacities. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of transformation.

### **Authenticity, Autonomy and Altruism in Relationships**

Growth is largely influenced by our interactions with others to actualize authenticity, autonomy and altruism. Altruistic relationships are caring, complementary, collaborative and cooperative, whereas selfish and competitive relationships tend to be destructive, divisive, unjust and alienating. Moving from self-centered to authentic, autonomous and altruistic ways of knowing, loving and being in relation with others allows for truer and healthier development. The process of creating authentic truth, altruistic love and autonomous goodwill depends on a healthy balance among independence and interdependence.

By an authentic relationship between two people, we mean a totally reciprocal relationship based on the mutual recognition of the universal value which they each share as human beings and which is inherent in their essential nature. This value is their uniquely human capacities of consciousness, of intellect, of feeling (heart), and of will. The mark of authenticity in human relations is the presence of self-sacrificing (unconditional) love, or altruism. (Hatcher, 1994, p. 1)

The effectiveness and utility of authenticity, autonomy and altruism is based on their holistic nature in addressing and representing the intrinsic worth of individuals, communities and institutions. When communities and institutions have cultures and laws that encourage these potentialities, individuals are more likely to manifest them. When societies encourage cooperation, promote unity, allow freedom, protect rights, honor dignity and uphold justice, individuals are more likely to do the same. Those individuals who champion these qualities in turn benefit the communities and institutions, enabling them to transform, creating a positive symbiotic relationship and transformational process.

As we reflect on, refine and apply our basic capacities to new situations in relationships with others, we develop our potentialities. Developing skills in planning, resource assessment, feedback, self-evaluation, restraint, sensitivity, striving, excellence, open-mindedness and creativity improves our competence (Marzano, et al., 1997). The dispositions for discipline, order, patience, forbearance, understanding, detachment, service, compassion, tolerance, love, kindness, fellowship, righteousness and other interpersonal skills need to be learned and cultivated for progress and development. To be authentic, autonomous and altruistic also requires human relations, conflict resolution, problem-

solving and consultation skills to effectively deal with differences and honor the dignity and rights of all people.

### **Authenticity, Autonomy and Altruism in the Classroom**

Learning is an inborn drive and necessity; it is the foundation of human excellence, prosperity, joy and glory. Learning to diagnose problems, find solutions, apply scientific and ethical standards and make ongoing accurate assessments stimulates greater authenticity, autonomy and altruism. Learning occurs in a context; it results from interaction with the environment. Creating contexts to actualize capacities in good ways is the goal of teachers.

Teacher to student and student to classroom interactions are potent sources for learning. The teacher plays a vital role in creating a good learning environment. Teachers have a responsibility to create classrooms characterized by truth, unity and service to facilitate the knowing, loving and willing capacities of their students. The educators' realization of authenticity, autonomy and altruism in their exercise of power, truth, justice and service affect the classroom environment and learning. When educators' capacities are properly developed and developing, they can create conditions to help students' development. Classrooms and teachers characterized by love, effort and knowledge will engender these qualities in the students.

Some students are so limited by their low views of themselves. A spirit of caring, acceptance, love and service can help open students to greater possibilities. Sometimes teachers need to use other approaches to have a positive effect. By having more authentic and altruistic relationships with learners, teachers have a greater chance of finding ways help their students develop increased autonomy. If teachers have not actualized their capacities, they are not in a position to help their students to do so. This process is synergetic and symbiotic: the more each party grows, the more energy is created, which causes the others to grow more as well. If teacher or students are turned off from learning, they negatively influence the whole class.

Students grow intellectually, psychologically and spiritually analogous to physical growth: they take in, process, assimilate, utilize, discard and develop. Like physical growth and health, intellectual, moral, social and spiritual growth can be hindered or helped. Not all that we consume is good or useful for us. However, many of the mistakes and errors made in the process of education can lead to opportunities for the further creation, expansion and consolidation of capacities. Developing authenticity, autonomy and altruism in the face of difficulties is a process of using will to increase and translate knowledge and love into action.

The law of causality is as true in the process of learning as it is in the physical world. In the classroom, every effect has a cause and every cause an effect. Teacher and student energy must be exerted to create a change of state. Cause and effect interactions among teachers and students are catalysts for growth and development that can lead toward greater happiness, authenticity, altruism and autonomy or their opposites. We can learn to control our responses to the challenges life brings, but we often cannot control the challenges. To respond effectively requires effort and an expanding internal locus of control.

As we actualize our potential and experience cognitive, affective and physical benefits, we are

further motivated. Teachers are responsible to engage and activate the cognitive, affective, psychomotor and conative domains in their classrooms to actualize authenticity, autonomy and altruism. Several suggestions for doing this are given in an earlier paper (Clarke, 1993), such as creating just, peaceful, positive and united classrooms that celebrate the oneness and uniqueness of all its members.

## **Conclusion**

As we develop greater authenticity, autonomy and altruism in our knowing, loving and willing, we uncover greater truth, beauty and good. These qualities are in themselves key aspects of the potentialities of every human being. These faculties are dynamic focal points for effective interactions in relationships and powerful forces in transforming individuals, institutions and communities. They are interconnected and influence one another's perceptions and actualization of potentialities.

As we struggle to overcome the prevailing forces in modern society that encourage us to indulge in selfish concerns and interests that lead to loneliness and despair, we will discover that success, honor, distinction and prosperity come from service. Service is the source of individual and social good and the cause of peace, well-being, happiness and advantage to all. To serve others is an aspiration that gives meaning and happiness to life. It also is a key to helping develop our authenticity, autonomy and altruism and transforming our lives, communities and institutions.

As we expand our service to others, we develop greater courage, power, ability and skill. Our capacity to do good and the power to strive, initiate, and sustain constructive and creative action unfolds. Through an unfettered search for truth, scientific thinking, moral decision-making, righteous actions and concern for the legitimate needs of others over our own, we learn how to apply these constructive forces and principles effectively to engender authenticity, autonomy and altruism.

Through exploration, reflection, consultation and application, we develop authentic, valid knowing; altruistic, sincere motivations and autonomous, virtuous dispositions. Like knowing, loving and serving, they interact and reinforce one another to form a holistic approach to transformation and education. Their realization and application in education offer new ways to interact with students and to think about teaching and the role of the teacher. Through self-sacrificing deeds, we assist others to become "individuals who can direct their own actions in order to achieve happiness through the fulfillment of their true nature" (Lample in Hatcher, 1998, p. xvii).

The "purpose of life is to reach the potential of discovering wholeness and develop to the optimal level" (Jung cited in Rad, 2010, p. 5). Both Jung and Maslow, as well as other humanist, transpersonal and integral psychologists (Wilber, 2000), hypothesize the ideal of wholeness and the process of individuation to know and be our true selves at a high state of development and psychological health. These characterizations are all expressions of authenticity, autonomy and altruism.

As we increase our capacities to become, love and reason, we can better encourage and help others do the same. As we cultivate resolution, endurance, perseverance, constancy, strength, determination, striving, high mindedness and firmness of purpose, we can dedicate ourselves to

matters of greater importance and benefit to others, accomplish more and become happier. Developing greater authentic, autonomy and altruism is a key to starting and sustaining this transformational process leading us to our potential for wisdom, dignity and nobility for which we were created and are destined.

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