



Authenticity in Kurosawa

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Much of the contemporary philosophical literature on authenticity is secondary work on figures like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Camus. I would like to find a different voice by searching for inspiration in the artistic expression that the theme of authenticity has found in the oeuvre of the Japanese film-maker Akira Kurosawa. To be authentic is to be true to ourselves. But what is it to be true to ourselves? The locution suggests that authenticity has something to do with the self and has something to do with being truthful or sincere. Kurosawa's *Ikiru* illustrates that authenticity requires the creation of a coherent self-image.¹ *Rashomon* illustrates that authenticity requires an attitude of sincerity.² There is a tension between both components, which accounts for the precarious nature of the project of authenticity. Much of Kurosawa's oeuvre can be seen as an exploration of this theme.

1. Coherence

"It is just not you!" This is a standard expression of one kind of charge of inauthenticity. We often try to fend off this charge by saying something like: "It is me – it is the *new* me." Sometimes we are right. A new me is becoming and the reproach is misplaced. Sometimes we are wrong. There is no new me becoming and the charge of inauthenticity sticks. What makes for the difference between being right and being wrong?

The problem is pointedly presented in *Ikiru*. The protagonist in *Ikiru* is a petty official named Watanabe. He has wasted away many years of his life doing meaningless tasks. When he learns that he has stomach cancer and only a few more months to live, he desperately searches to give a turn to his life that would make it more meaningful. He withdraws all of his money from the bank and decides to spend it on a night on the town. Subsequently he takes up a friendship with a young girl. Neither choice proves to be gratifying. It is only when he decides to go back to work and take up the cause of a citizens' group to build a park that he finds some gratification. Throughout the film we hear the charge that Watanabe is just not himself anymore. During his night on the town and his friendship with the young girl, the charge certainly sticks.

The desperation in his expression belies the response that a new Watanabe is becoming. But then in a moment of clarity Watanabe remembers the petition of the citizens' group that he sent through the bureaucratic mill some days prior, and decides to return to the office and to save it from the grindstone. This turnaround occurs during a conversation with the young girl in a restaurant. As we see Watanabe rush out of the restaurant, there is a party in the backdrop with children singing "Happy Birthday"; when Watanabe returns to work and begins his crusade, we hear an orchestral version of the same song. At this point the charge does not stick anymore. The birthday music signifies that a new Watanabe is indeed becoming. Why does the charge that he is not himself anymore stick during his night on the town and his friendship with the young girl, but not during his crusade in the office?

Though Watanabe's crusade in the office is no less of a turnaround than his night on the town or his friendship with the young girl, there is some continuity between his earlier life and his crusade, whereas there is no continuity between his earlier life and his night on the town or his friendship with the young girl. His crusade in the office is a continuation of his earlier life as a public official, yet this time with commitment and dedication. But there is nothing in his background that can provide a niche for a night on the town or a friendship with a young girl. The lack of it is most transparent when Watanabe decides to sing a song from his youth in a bar during his night on the town. The pathetic performance underlines his sense of desperation. The song from his past does not have a place in his present surroundings. The whole scene mirrors what is really distressing us: Watanabe's present choices do not have any place against the backdrop of his past.

Ikiru exemplifies a particular conception of authenticity. On this conception, to be authentic is to make choices that are coherent with a past. Authenticity does not stand in the way of change, but for an alleged new self to be genuinely a new self, there must be certain threads that connect it to the old self. The authentic person does not turn her back on the past, but searches for a way to integrate her present with her earlier self. It is this challenge that Watanabe faces in response to his terminal illness. His terminal illness forces him to do something that is meaningful, but any change that he brings to his life must be such that it can be made coherent with his past. Watanabe's desperation dissolves when he turns to a project that has precisely this feature.

2. Sincerity

"Quit kidding yourself!" This is a standard expression of a different kind of charge of inauthenticity. Unlike the inauthentic person, the authentic person does not need to succumb to self-deception in order to uphold a fragile self-image.

Rashomon relates the same series of events through the eyes of four persons. The common features in their accounts are that a couple is lured into the woods by a bandit under some false pretext, that the woman has sex with the bandit in front of her husband who is tied up in ropes, and that the husband is killed after the incident. In all other respects the stories differ. The bandit relates a story in which the woman gives herself to him and urges him to fight her husband to death. He kills the husband in an honorable fight. The woman presents a story in which she is victimized both by the bandit and by the scorn of her husband. Her weakness keeps her from committing suicide in the face of shame. Through a medium, the dead husband presents a story in which his wife betrayed him by giving herself to the bandit and by asking the bandit to take her with him and to kill her husband. But he was set free by the bandit and had the strength to commit suicide in the face of shame. The body of the husband was found by a woodcutter. A valuable dagger is missing from the scene and the suspicion arises that the woodcutter pulled the dagger out of the corpse and stole it. To exculpate himself he offers a story in which the husband was not killed by a dagger, but in a less than honorable sword fight.

Rashomon is a challenging film for philosophical interpretation. The following interpretations all contain a kernel of truth. First, the narrators are consciously lying to deceive their respective audiences. The bandit wants to receive a lighter sentence, the woman does not want to indict herself, the dead husband has his posthumous honor to defend and the woodcutter is covering up for a theft. Second, the film is about self-deception. The narrators play loose with the truth to protect and reinforce their self-images and have come to believe their own fabrications. Third, what the film conveys is that there is no absolute truth. All truth is perspectival. There is nothing like a true sequence of events independent of the perspective of the respective narrators.

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive and are more and less plausible depending on the particular event under discussion. Did the husband commit suicide or was he killed in a sword fight? Did the woodcutter steal the dagger or not? The interpretation of perspectival truth is nonsense with respect to these events. There is a fact of the matter here and, to speak with Aristotle, at least someone is saying of what is, that it is not, or of what is not, that it is. The interpretation of self-deception is also implausible with respect to these events. People do sink very low on the scale of epistemic integrity at times, but it would be an unlikely feat to forget removing a dagger from a corpse or to confuse a solitary suicide with a sword fight. The interpretation of conscious deception is the only plausible interpretation for these events. In so far as *Rashomon* is about deception, it is of little interest to our understanding of authenticity.

With respect to other events, the interpretation of self-deception is not implausible at all. Did the woman give herself to the bandit or not? Did the

bandit signal his desire that the woman go along with him and desert her husband? Did the woman signal her desire that the bandit fight her husband to death and take her along with him? At least some of the narrators are refusing to acknowledge the facts, because to do so would shatter their self-image: maybe the woman is fooling herself because she wants to continue viewing herself as an honorable wife; maybe the bandit is fooling himself because he aspires to the image of a ladies' man and a cunning swordsman; maybe the husband is fooling himself because he wishes to believe that he entered his death as a morally upright person. What is on display here is inauthenticity as insincerity. Unlike the characters in *Rashomon*, the authentic person is able to accept his agency and place in the world without taking recourse to self-deception.

The interpretation of perspectival truth is the most difficult to swallow from a philosophical angle. As we shall see, there is a curious tension between the demands of coherence and sincerity. I will propose an interpretation of the notion of perspectival truth which permits us to steer clear of both incoherence and insincerity in our quest for authenticity.

3. Coherence *cum* Sincerity

We have focused on authenticity as coherence and as sincerity. A cogent account must bring out the relationship between both components. Authenticity is a normative constraint that imposes certain restrictions on my present choices. But it is not a conservative injunction to continue living my life on the same old beaten tracks. At the core of authenticity is a call to take on a creative approach to life. To integrate my past with my present is a creative process: on the one hand, my past allows me to see my present choices in a particular light; on the other hand, as my current choices and projects shift, there may be a need to see my past in a different light to warrant coherence. There is a certain malleability to the stories we tell about our present choices and our past. In the face of change, I may need to exploit it, either through placing a particular interpretation on my present choices or through reinterpreting my past. So to meet the demands of coherence we receive an editorial license in relating stories about our past and our present choices. But the editorial license is at the same time constrained by the demands of sincerity: the authentic person also has the courage to face the past for what it is. Authenticity is coherence within the limits of sincerity. This is what makes the project of authenticity so precarious: it is tempting to pursue coherence at the cost of self-deception or to pursue sincerity at the cost of fragmentation.

My account of this editorial license rests on a particular view of the nature of mental states. Both psychologists and philosophers have argued that mental

states have the unique feature that they are affected by our interpretations of them. In psychology, appraisal theories of emotion are framed in opposition to the James-Lange theory of emotion.³ Following the Danish physiologist Carl Lange, William James conjectured that each emotion corresponds to a unique physiological state. Schachter and Singer designed a famous psychological experiment to discredit the James-Lange theory.⁴ Experimental subjects were injected with either a placebo or a drug that causes a tremor and an increased heart rate. Of the subjects who received the drug, some were informed about the effects of the drug, while others were not. Subsequently, some of the subjects in each category were paired with a stooge in the waiting room who tries to bring out euphoric responses in them, while others were paired with a stooge who tries to bring out angry responses in them. With some qualifications, Schachter and Singer observed that the non-informed subjects were more likely than either the placebo subjects and the informed subjects to be responsive to the stooge's lead and to describe themselves in a like manner. Schachter and Singer take this to be evidence against the James-Lange theory. One and the same drug-induced physiological state can underlie widely diverging emotional states such as euphoria and anger. The differentiation among emotions comes about through a cognitive appraisal of a generic physiological state of arousal. The subjects who were informed of the effects of the drug had a sufficient explanation for the state of arousal and did not develop the emotion of euphoria or anger in the presence of the stooge. The subjects who were not informed of the effects of the drug come to interpret the arousal state as a euphoric state or an angry state depending on the cues from the stooge, and they act and describe their emotions accordingly.

In philosophy, a particularly perspicuous expression of the view that our emotions and attitudes are constituted by self-interpretation can be found in the work of Stuart Hampshire.⁵ Consider a case in which I am uncertain about a bodily state: I feel some sense of discomfort, but do not know whether my tonsils or my throat is inflamed. In this case, there is a fact of the matter about the *locus* of the inflammation which is unaffected by my uncertainty, or by my coming to reach a verdict one way or the other. But suppose that I am uncertain about a mental state. Suppose that I feel some uneasiness about some past action, but I do not know whether it is "embarrassment, or guilt, or some kind of shame, or. . . just regret, the feeling that something of value has been lost."⁶ In this case it is wrong to think that there is some determinate fact of the matter that is waiting for me to be discovered through self-examination. The only truthful account of my present state of mind is that my sentiments are still genuinely confused. Self-examination is what forms and brings focus to my state of mind: making up my mind and coming to know my sentiments about the past action is "at the same time the crystallization of the conscious feeling."⁷ Forming a belief about a physical state typically does not affect the

state in question, while forming a belief about a mental state contributes to the formation of the state in question. Of course, this does not imply that thinking it so is what makes it so: first-person assessments of mental states are notoriously fallible. I may be self-deceiving in my assessment of the situation in which my uneasiness occurs. Or, my self-assessment may be inconsistent with subsequent agency: it certainly casts doubt on my determination that I regret a past action if I continue to act in the same vein. But subject to these constraints, what transforms a state of confusion into a state of regret is my determination that I have lost something of value through my agency.

The same argument can be made for motivations. I may find myself uncertain about what motivates me to perform some action or other. Again, there is no fact of the matter as to what is genuinely motivating me that is independent of my self-assessment. It is only when I resolve my uncertainty and come to determine what is driving my agency that my motivation becomes determinate.

By varying the time frame of the self-assessment, this picture of emotions and motivations can be extended to cast light on what it means for our life stories to be malleable. Sometimes self-assessment is immediate: we determine immediately where our sense of discomfort comes from or what is driving our agency. But sometimes self-assessment is absent or is unable to yield much clarity at the time of our initial reaction or at the time of agency. We do not break through the uncertainty and clarity is only gained through *post hoc* determinations.

Consider a case of indeterminate emotions. Suppose that I experience a raw sentiment of displeasure and agitation immediately following some change in my life. Can I be said to have regrets? I cannot, unless I interpret my sentiments as an expression of having lost something of value in my life. I may resist this interpretation and say that I have no regrets, and that I am merely overwhelmed by my new station in life. Sometimes we suppress such raw sentiments, or we acknowledge them but resist an interpretation until some later point in time. In such cases, what our mental states are all about today becomes contingent on what the future has in store for us. Depending on how matters evolve, I have a license to point to this early state of displeasure and agitation and to say, either that I regretted the change from the first minute on, or that I was merely somewhat overwhelmed at first.

Consider a case of indeterminate motivations. Sometimes it remains unclear what motive engages our will at the time of choice. A complex motivational structure underlies our choice and there is no fact of the matter as to what we would have done had the ground for certain motives been present or absent. Consider the following example. Suppose that I am considering a move to San Francisco. There is a job available but it is something of a gamble as a career move. I am an artist in my free time and I find the art scene in San

Francisco exciting but also somewhat intimidating. Then there is a former lover who has recently moved to the bay area and is too much on my mind for my own good. Suppose that I make the move. Would I have made the move had it not been for the career possibilities? Would I have made the move had it not been for the art scene? Would I have made the move had it not been for my former lover? Sometimes there simply is no fact of the matter as to what I would have done, had certain isolated features in my motivational structure been different from what they actually were. The best I can say is that my choice might or might not have been affected. To say that it might have been affected is to say that it is false that it would not have been affected. To say that it might not have been affected is to say that it is false that it would have been affected. The malleability of our life stories rides on this indeterminacy. Suppose that my career greatly benefits from my move to San Francisco, but neither Apollo nor Aphrodite smile on me. Then would it be insincere if, in looking back on my decision to come to San Francisco, what I see is a person who dares to take a gamble for career improvement? If, on the other hand, my artistic ambitions or my love life would benefit from my move to San Francisco, would it be insincere to cast my move in a different light, say, as an expression of Bohemian whim or romantic passion? In constructing a coherent account of my life, I have an editorial license to be selective in deciding on the motivations that brought about my past choices.

My point is not epistemological. On my scenario, it is not the case that unbeknown to me there is some fact of the matter as to what my true motivation is at the time of choice and that the subsequent course of events provides me with an insight concerning this true motivation. For instance, suppose that what truly motivates me is my former lover, but I myself am unclear at the time whether the pull comes from this corner, from my career or from my artistic ambitions. Also suppose that by witnessing a sense of fulfillment and a sense of emptiness as some of my alleged dreams come true and others do not, I come to learn what my true motivations were. This is a plausible scenario, but it is not the scenario that I have in mind. On my scenario, my motivation is genuinely indeterminate at the time of choice and it is only when my life takes a particular turn that I come to impose an interpretation on my choice. We do not merely discover our motivations through introspection, but instead, construct our motivations through imposing interpretations. The interpretations may remain absent at the time of choice and my earlier motivation may only crystallize at a later time when an interpretation is imposed that construes the moment of choice as a link in the chain of a coherent life story.

Metaphysical eyebrows may be raised at this point: how can it be the case that certain facts are true at one point in time and yet their truth is dependent on the world taking one direction rather than some other direction at some

later point in time? This brings to mind Aristotle's sea-battle. Let there be a sea-battle in the Gulf on 12 June 1998 which was set in motion by presidential orders at midnight after a proliferation of hostilities. Is it true on 11 June 1998 that there will be a sea-battle on 12 June 1998? Is it true on 11 June 1998 that something pernicious is in the making? Though this has been the subject of much debate over the ages, I do not think an affirmative answer to these questions should raise too many eyebrows: it is true on 11 June 1998 that there will be a sea-battle the next day and that something pernicious is in the making, although what makes it true are future facts that indeed might not have come about. Similarly, it is true at some earlier time that I have regrets or that I go to San Francisco for love, although what makes it true is the interpretation that I come to impose at a later time, and the world might have taken a different turn such that I would indeed not have imposed it.

If a sequence of events leaves a wide range of indeterminacy, then I am free to choose between different interpretations to provide for an optimal fit. Furthermore, as my life takes on different turns, alternative interpretations of the same sequence of events may afford a tighter fit. But if interpretations may shift relative to some temporal perspective, then, by the same token, alternative and even conflicting interpretations can coexist relative to a narrator's perspective. If future selves have licenses to cast alternative interpretations on earlier selves, then what would keep us from giving licenses to cast alternative interpretations on other selves? In *Rashomon*, the sequence of events is of such a nature as to leave a wide range of indeterminacy. If the woman did indeed give herself to the bandit, did she do so in resignation, or in order to pain her husband, or with uncalculated passion? Did the husband look upon his wife with scorn? What did the woman want from the bandit with respect to her husband's fate? On any of these issues, the raw materials may be a diffuse spread of unspecified emotions and motivations and the answer to questions as to whether this or that is the case may be indeterminate. In this case, nothing prevents the respective narrators from imposing interpretations that make the sequence of events fit in with coherent accounts of themselves and from doing so with a sense of pride and dignity. That a single person would not be able to embrace all of these accounts at the peril of inconsistency is not in itself a mark of the narrators' insincerity. Ascriptions of emotions and motivations are to some extent relative to the speaker and the time of utterance. Of course, this does not mean that just anything goes. What it does mean is that when one person says different things at different times about how she felt or what motivated her at some earlier time, or different persons say different things about how others feel or what motivates them, then we must not rush to the conclusion that at least one of the ascriptions must be flawed. This I take to be the ground and also the boundary of the possibility of perspectival truth.

The motivation to construct a coherent self-image and to project it to the world is a central concern for each of *Rashomon*'s narrators. They present sequences of events in which their respective editorial licenses leave them with some leeway. But there is a fine line between using an editorial license to secure a coherent self-image and self-deception, one which an insincere person oversteps. There is also a fine line between self-deception and straightforward deception to project a false image of ourselves to the world, one which a dishonest person oversteps. In *Rashomon*, the lines are constantly overstepped, but the viewer cannot determine at what junctions. We might suppose that the wife's feelings for the bandit were indeterminate such that neither her nor the bandit's interpretation of them is more or less authoritative. Alternatively, we might suppose that her disgust was unambiguous and that the bandit is self-deceiving when he claims that the woman gave herself to him. Yet again, we might suppose that the woman's disgust was more than unambiguous: it was also entirely transparent, so that only straightforward deception could account for the bandit's story. There are many inconsistencies between the stories and the viewer cannot determine whether perspectival truth, self-deception or straightforward deception is at work. This is a reminder of the fragile nature of the project of authenticity. We ought to live in an authentic manner: to do so we have an editorial license to construct a coherent and sincere account of our lives. It is all too easy not to live up to this project: in striving for too much coherence, we may overstep our editorial license through insincerity; in striving for too much sincerity, we may refuse to make creative use of our license and be left with straight-jacketed or fragmented lives.

4. Authenticity under Siege

Kurosawa adapted Gorky's play *The Lower Depths* to a film by the same name. It is a story of low-lives who are huddled together in a shanty. They are visited by an old man who forces them to see their lives for what they are. In the play, he sings a song: "In the dark of the night with the path disappearing. . .the path disappearing behind and before."⁸ Much of Kurosawa's work is an exploration of the precarious nature of the authentic life. The project of tracing a path through life is a fragile undertaking. What follows is just a small sample.⁹

Paths may become too steep. Instead of walking on, we step aside, look back and contemplate the distant trajectory of the path through more hospitable surroundings. This is the predicament of the low-lives in *The Lower Depths*.¹⁰ They try to force coherence on their lives by recalling days of past glory. An alcoholic who had a career as an actor tries to remember fragments of verses and boasts about his earlier successes in the theater. A tinker who has long

been without a job continues tinkering with his tools. A young woman recalls some passionate love from her youth. A middle-aged man boasts about his samurai heritage. Their inauthenticity derives from the fact that they are selective with respect to the past and see their present lives as continuous with days of past glory that are long gone. For the low-lives, coherence is gained at the cost of sincerity. The unwelcome sincerity of the visiting old man confronts them with their fragmented lives.

A common theme is a change in social conditions: the landscape drops out and paths disintegrate as a result. This is the ever recurring predicament of the samurai in Kurosawa movies. The sincerity of the samurai makes them all too vulnerable to the recognition of the tragedy of their fragmented lives. In *Yojimbo*, the rise of power of a middle class has left a samurai “with no master to serve other than his will to survive and no devices other than his wit and sword.”¹¹ His aimlessness is expressed in the opening scene when he throws up a forked stick on the road and follows the direction in which the fork is pointing. In *The Seven Samurai*, we see a group of samurai who no longer have their former status take on the task of aiding villagers to fend off a band of brigands.¹² The samurai, in cooperation with the villagers, succeed in their endeavors. There is a curious conversation in the final scene between the three surviving samurai who claim to have lost again. The villagers are the only winners. The samurai find themselves once again without a purpose in life. The change in social conditions has blocked their paths in life, and isolated tasks, however valuable they may be, do not suffice to give a sense of coherence.

Paths may also become altogether unrecognizable in a sincere confrontation with the past. This is the fate of *Ran*'s Hidetora.¹³ Hidetora is an aging warlord who decides to divide his territory among his three sons. Early on in the film, he makes light of the war-mongering days of his youth. But the strife between his sons turns him into an exile. Torrential rains force him to take cover in the hut of a blind man. The blind man turns out to be a victim of Hidetora's past savagery. His eyes were put out and he was allowed to keep only a flute. Under the piercing melody of the flute, Hidetora is forced to face his past with sincerity. A self-image that was built on illusions of heroism and glory shatters and Hidetora is driven mad.

5. Conclusion

Authenticity is a common concern for both artists and philosophers. Instead of commenting once more on the canonical grand masters of authenticity in philosophy, I have turned my attention to Kurosawa, the grand master of authenticity in cinema. A recurrent theme throughout Kurosawa's oeuvre is

that the authentic life is precarious. The injunction of sincerity may stand in the way of constructing a coherent image of the self. The injunction of constructing a coherent image of the self may induce us to play loose with sincerity. Kurosawa explores the various contingencies that bring out these tensions in a masterful and original manner throughout his work.¹⁴

Notes

1. Akira Kurosawa, director, *Ikiru* (1952).
2. Akira Kurosawa, director, *Rashomon* (1951) after two short-stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, "In a Grove" and "Rashomon" (New York; Liveright, 1952), pp. 19–44.
3. A comprehensive discussion of appraisal theories can be found in Mick Power and Tim Dalgleish, *Cognition and Emotion - From Order to Disorder* (East Sussex, England: Psychology Press, 1997), pp. 79–99.
4. Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer, "Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State," in *Psychological Review* 69 (1962), pp. 379–399.
5. Stuart Hampshire, "Sincerity and Single-Mindedness," in *Freedom of Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 232–256.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
8. Maksim Gorky, *The Lower Depths* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973), p. 16.
9. Another favorite theme of Kurosawa is the conflict between the normative constraints of authenticity and rational choice. For instance, in *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946) and *Dersu Uzala* (1974), the protagonists make costly choices for no other reason than to retain a genuine coherence in their lives.
10. Kurosawa, director, *The Lower Depths* (1957).
11. Kurosawa, director, *Yojimbo* (1961).
12. Kurosawa, director, *The Seven Samurai* (1954).
13. Kurosawa, director, *Ran* (1985).
14. I am grateful to Adrienne Chockley, James Forrester, Iain Martel, Claudia Mills, Rachel Singpurwalla, Daniel Stoljar, Michael Tooley, Adam Vinueza, the editor and an anonymous referee of this journal for their comments and suggestions. This work was in part supported by a fellowship of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

