

To Thine Own Self: The Psychology of Authenticity

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One of the core principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, the 12-Step addiction recovery program, is authenticity. At least two of the steps emphasize the importance of honest moral inventory, and the AA “chip”—the medallion handed out to commemorate periods of continued sobriety—reads: “To thine own self be true.”

The people who created AA back in the 1930s were not scientists or philosophers, but the early literature contains many insights that scientists have verified in intervening years. The link between authenticity and morality and psychological health is not intuitively obvious. Some philosophers have indeed argued that the desire to be authentic—to act in a way that is consistent with one’s values and sense of self—is linked to well-being. But others have just as forcefully argued the opposite—that learning to express thoughts and feelings that obscure one’s true inner state is an important adaptation for successful living.

A team of psychological scientists has been working to resolve this issue empirically. Francesca Gino, Maryam Kouchaki and Adam Galinsky—from the business schools at Harvard, Northwestern and Columbia, respectively—are not interested in addiction recovery as such, but they are interested in the psychological consequences of being true to oneself. Authenticity means not only owning one’s actions, but also acting in accordance with one’s thoughts, desires and needs. This commitment is essential for self-regulation, and violating this commitment leads to feelings of inauthenticity, which taint one’s moral self-concept and lead to emotional dysregulation. In short, being an imposter to oneself leads to moral and psychological distress.

That at least is the idea that these scientists tested in a series of laboratory experiments. In all the studies, described in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, they asked volunteers to recall and write about a time when they felt either authentic or inauthentic—priming those contrasting psychological states. The scientists then compared these two groups of subjects on several measures related to morality, with some intriguing results. For example, they found that when people recall feeling inauthentic, they subsequently feel more impure and less moral. They also experience a greater desire for physical cleansing—another way of tapping into impure feelings.

So being dishonest with oneself triggers feelings of impurity and desire for cleanliness, but there’s more. This heightened desire to be cleansed in turn made subjects more likely to help others—including donating money to others—as a way of compensating for the feelings of immorality. Other negative experiences did not trigger this same cascade of feelings—only inauthenticity—and it was clearly the feelings of moral impurity that boosted the urge to help and serve others.

Helping others is also a core principle of Alcoholics Anonymous, and indeed the word “service” also appears on the commemorative medallions. It appears that authenticity and service are inextricably bound up in one another, and together can boost the emotional well-being necessary for recovery from addiction.

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