

Challenges of Authenticity in Capitalism: Money and Virtue

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Accepted and published August, 2024 , DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13213653>

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Abstract:

We previously explored the concept of authenticity within the framework of capitalism, here we are discussing how wealth, power, and relationships are often intertwined. We examine the philosophical underpinnings of authenticity, critiques the role of wealth in shaping societal values, and contrasts capitalist authenticity with virtues such as justice and philanthropy.

Keywords: Authenticity, Capitalism, Philosophy, Justice

Introduction:

Capitalism is frequently praised for its efficiency in generating wealth and driving technological progress. Yet, a pressing question remains: can capitalism truly reflect authenticity, a quality often associated with moral and philosophical virtue? This article examines the complexities of authenticity within a capitalist framework, employing both illustrative anecdotes and philosophical arguments to uncover its core nature.

Previously, we discussed how virtues acquired through material or financial means might be considered inauthentic (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024d). Such virtues are often viewed as obsolete or misleading. This perspective doesn't entirely dismiss the value of financial support or earning a living through virtuous or prestigious actions, but it does provoke idealistic and philosophical inquiries about the validity of comparing authentic deeds to inauthentic virtues or relationships. We observe in the contemporary challenges that the virtue of science and intellect are separated from the scientific values (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024b) raising the question regarding all the academic standards and ethical considerations in the academic world and at the end we observe empirically that a considerable difference exists between the use of "good terms" and virtues which renders them inauthentic in reality (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024)

Illustrative Anecdote:

Consider the scenario in contemporary social norms in Iran where a young woman is approached by a seemingly wealthy man in a car. Despite her initial hesitation, she engages with him, leading to a relationship. She is aware of his other relationships but remains hopeful for a deeper connection. In a minority of cases, such relationships may evolve, but in most instances, they do not. This narrative reflects a broader societal phenomenon where wealth leads and overshadows genuine emotional connections, exemplifying one aspect of capitalist wealth that ultimately proves to be ephemeral and unfulfilling.

Capitalism and the Pursuit of Wealth:

Wealth, in the capitalist paradigm, often takes precedence over other values such as knowledge and courage. This prioritization can be seen in various domains, from technological advancements to scientific research. Capitalism can propel significant achievements like space exploration and particle physics research at CERN, yet it remains, fundamentally, another "ism" - a system driven by its own intrinsic motives (Harvey, 2005).

Philosophical Perspectives on Justice and Capitalism:

The notion of justice within capitalism is contentious. A father unable to afford education for his gifted child cannot be consoled by the greater knowledge possessed by prestigious research institutions. Justice, inherently, cannot align with or be subjugated by capitalist ideals. True philosophy, grounded in virtue, rejects the notion that aristocracy based purely on wealth can be deemed authentic (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1999).

Authenticity Through Sharing and Philanthropy:

Authenticity in capitalism can be argued to emerge through the principles of sharing, entrepreneurship, and philanthropy. Human capacity for consumption and pleasure is finite, limited by physical and temporal constraints. Wealth, unless utilized for the greater good, lacks authenticity and is ultimately deceptive and doomed to perish (Schumpeter, 1942; Stiglitz, 2012).

Relationships and Wealth:

Returning to the story of the young woman and the wealthy man, relationships founded on financial incentives lack spiritual authenticity. Genuine relationships are validated through virtue, not material wealth. In the court of true justice, relationships devoid of authenticity are either reformed or nullified, regardless of their outward glitter (Nussbaum, 1992).

Capitalism's Moral and Ethical Implications:

Capitalism, while fostering innovation and economic growth, often does so at the expense of ethical considerations. The relentless pursuit of profit can lead to moral compromises, where the end justifies the means. This ethical erosion undermines the very essence of authenticity, as actions motivated by profit rather than genuine moral values cannot be considered authentic (Friedman, 2002; Sandel, 2012).

The Role of Consumerism:

Consumerism, a byproduct of capitalism, further distorts the concept of authenticity. It promotes superficial values and ephemeral satisfaction, creating a cycle of perpetual dissatisfaction. Authenticity, in contrast, is rooted in enduring values and meaningful experiences that transcend material possessions (Bauman, 2007; Fromm, 1976).

Impact on Individual Identity:

Capitalism also influences individual identity, often shaping it around consumption and material success. This external validation can overshadow intrinsic values, leading to a fragmented sense of self. Authenticity requires a return to core values and self-awareness, which capitalism's external pressures often impede (Giddens, 1991; Lasch, 1979).

Authenticity in Corporate Practices:

Corporations in a capitalist system face a paradox when it comes to authenticity. While corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are touted as authentic commitments to social good, they are often driven by profit motives. Genuine authenticity in corporate practices would require a fundamental shift towards valuing social and environmental impacts over mere financial gain (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Carroll, 1999).

Philosophical Approaches to Authenticity:

Exploring authenticity in the context of capitalism requires examining various philosophical approaches. Existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger emphasize the importance of individual freedom and self-determination in achieving authenticity. Sartre argues that authenticity involves living in accordance with one's true self, free from societal pressures and material constraints (Sartre, 1943). Heidegger, on the other hand, views authenticity as an existential state achieved by

confronting the realities of one's existence and making choices that reflect one's true nature (Heidegger, 1927).

Existential Authenticity:

In existentialism, authenticity is closely tied to the concept of 'being'. According to Heidegger, individuals must confront their 'being-toward-death' to live authentically. This means acknowledging the inevitability of death and making choices that reflect one's true self, rather than conforming to societal norms or material desires (Heidegger, 1927). In a capitalist society, this would mean making ethical and meaningful choices despite the pressures to conform to materialistic values.

Authenticity and Virtue Ethics:

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, also provides a framework for understanding authenticity. Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, often translated as 'flourishing', involves living a life of virtue in accordance with reason. Authenticity, in this sense, is achieved by cultivating virtues such as courage, wisdom, and justice, and aligning one's actions with these virtues (Aristotle, 350 BCE). In capitalism, this would involve prioritizing ethical behavior and social responsibility over mere profit.

Marxist Critique of Capitalist Authenticity:

Karl Marx provides a critical perspective on authenticity within capitalism, arguing that the system inherently alienates individuals from their true selves. According to Marx, capitalism leads to alienation in several forms: from the product of one's labor, from the act of production, from one's own species-being, and from other individuals. This alienation prevents individuals from achieving authenticity, as they are reduced to mere commodities within the capitalist system (Marx, 1844).

The Role of Community in Authenticity:

Communitarian philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre argue that authenticity is rooted in community and tradition. According to MacIntyre, individuals find meaning and authenticity through their roles and relationships within a community. Capitalism, with its emphasis on individualism and competition, undermines these communal bonds, leading to a loss of authenticity (MacIntyre, 1981).

Authenticity in Eastern Philosophies:

Eastern philosophies, such as Confucianism and Taoism, offer additional perspectives on authenticity. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of social harmony and fulfilling one's roles and responsibilities within the family and society. Authenticity is achieved by living in accordance with the principles of righteousness, propriety, and benevolence (Confucius, 500 BCE). Taoism, on the other hand, advocates for living in harmony with the Tao, or the natural way of the universe. Authenticity involves simplicity, humility, and spontaneity, rejecting material excess and artificial desires (Laozi, 400 BCE).

Practical Solutions for Enhancing Authenticity in Capitalism:

Addressing the authenticity deficit in capitalism requires both philosophical reflection and practical solutions. Philosophically, a reevaluation of values and ethics is needed to place virtue above wealth. Practically, policies that promote equitable wealth distribution, social justice, and ethical business practices can foster a more authentic capitalist system. Examples include implementing progressive taxation, supporting social enterprises, and encouraging corporate transparency and accountability (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1999).

Conclusion:

The pursuit of perfection in philosophy, though idealistic, seeks to

reform society by advocating and adhering to these high ideals. While a perfect society may be unattainable, striving for perfection can drive significant improvements in an imperfect and troubled world. In capitalism, authenticity must go beyond mere wealth accumulation and encompass virtues such as justice, philanthropy, and genuine human connection. When authenticity is taught as part of ethics and philosophy, it should not be dismissed by skeptics, even in religious countries like Iran. Despite shifts in societal norms driven by dissatisfaction with religious governance, the fundamental nature of governance remains resilient. Ultimately, neither corrupted capitalism nor changes in religious norms can undermine the core authentic virtues within a society (Mikaeil et al., 2024).

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