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RE-CONNECTING INDIVIDUALS IN A TIME OF AUTHENTICITY

On the importance of social norms and moral stagecraft

ABSTRACT

By rethinking authenticity and reaffirming the significance of social norms, this paper sheds light on the challenges of fragmentation in late-modern societies and offers insights into promoting coexistence. While authenticity – celebrated as self-expression and individual freedom – has facilitated significant social and emancipatory advancements, its hyper-individualistic interpretation increasingly erodes civility and collective values. Bridging philosophical discussions on authenticity with sociological theories of social norms, the paper explores the concept of 'moral stagecraft', a model demonstrating how deliberate role-playing and adherence to shared norms can cultivate moral growth and rebuild trust. By redefining authenticity as an aspirational alignment with one's better moral self – grounded in shared norms and values, and linked to the ideal of 'positive liberty' – the paper contributes to contemporary debates on morality, individuality, and collective responsibility. Practical applications illustrate how this redefinition reconciles personal freedom with social cohesion, offering a viable path forward in an era shaped by hyper-individualism.

KEYWORDS

Authenticity, Civility,
Moral stagecraft,
Norms and values,
Positive liberty, Social
norms

Introduction: setting the scene

During my daily commute, I notice the litter scattered across the streets. I can't help but feel some irritation. Litter is disruptive, comparable with dog excrement on the sidewalk, cyclists riding against traffic, reckless use of the electric scooters, loud music on the train, feet on the bus seat, public drunkenness, tailgating, disruptive honking, graffiti on walls that are not intended for that purpose, rude language (on social media), and all other sorts of completely unnecessary destruction. These are all clear examples of individual behaviour that is insufficiently controlled by '*social norms*', i.e. by general expectations about how one has to behave in public if one wants to keep that sphere tidy, cohesive and livable for all. Some would say that norm-defiant behaviour reflects a broader tendency towards moral decline. Over time, social observers

have indeed lamented over an increasing lack in kindness, honesty and basic human decency (Herman 1997). Even if the perception of degeneracy is a psychological illusion to which people all over the world and through history have been susceptible – a claim defended by Mastroianni & Gilbert (2023) – and even if it is true that there never was what Andrew Peterson (2019: 7) calls a “*golden age of civility*”, the mere presence or perception of rude, arrogant, obnoxious, selfish and inappropriate social behaviour should worry us (Arthur 2019; Sutton 2017). The reason is straightforward and has already been neatly captured by the Spanish intellectual José Y Gasset Ortega (1957: 75-76) in the 1930s: there is no guarantee that civilisation is here to stay. “*Restrictions, standards, courtesy, indirect methods, justice, reason! Why are all these invented, why are all these complications created? They are all summed up in the word civilisation, which, through the underlying notion of civis, the citizen, reveals its real origin. By means of all these, there is an attempt to make possible the city, the community, common life. Hence, if we look into all these constituents of civilisation just enumerated, we shall find the same common bias. All, in fact, presuppose the radical progressive desire on the part of each individual to take others into consideration. Civilisation is, before all, the will to live in common. A man is uncivilised, barbarian in the degree in which he does not take others into account. Barbarism is the tendency to disassociation.*” The basic idea is clear: individuals who independently decide how to behave in public – and disregard social norms – create undesirable tensions and contribute to the unraveling of the social fabric. At this point, it is important to clarify that the notion of ‘*moral degeneration*’ in this paper is not understood as implying that all deviations from prevailing norms are morally problematic, nor that existing norms are beyond contestation. Norms are historically situated, socially mediated, and often the subject of disagreement. Moral degeneration, as used in this paper, refers not to deviation as such, but to a perceived erosion of shared normative orientations that enable mutual recognition and social cooperation. As such, it is a normative diagnosis rather than a sociological claim to consensus.

This paper revolves around two fundamental questions. The *first* is why some individuals choose not to adhere to social norms – or, in a more cynical interpretation, why they conform to the emerging social norm of rejecting social norms altogether. While acknowledging this as a general tendency (since many still follow social conventions) and recognizing the plethora and complexity of socioeconomic, psychological, technological and political factors involved, I will focus specifically on the concept and impact of ‘*authenticity*’, which, as Gilles Lipovetsky (2021) suggests, courses through contemporary society like a fever. At this point, some clarification is in order. This paper does not claim that there is empirical evidence for a general or universal increase in norm deviation, nor does it treat social norms as a fixed or unified entity. Norms are multiple, historically situated, and often fluid, and may take both ‘*formal*’ and ‘*informal*’ forms that coexist and sometimes conflict. ‘*Formal norms*’ are codified and publicly articulated, while ‘*informal norms*’ operate implicitly within particular social contexts and reference groups. When this paper refers to

the erosion or disregard of norms, it primarily concerns broadly shared public norms that structure mutual expectations in common social spaces, rather than all context-specific or informal normative expectations. The analysis is therefore normative and interpretive rather than empirical, and remains attentive to the fact that norm compliance is often shaped by competing reference groups and conflicting expectations. In this sense, the paper does not merely describe existing social arrangements, but reflects on the conditions under which a plurality of individuals can sustain a shared social world. The criteria proposed are not intended as universally binding prescriptions, but as philosophically motivated proposals grounded in concerns about mutual recognition, social trust, and the possibility of common life. As such, they remain open to contestation and disagreement. The question is therefore not who authoritatively determines what society should be, but which normative orientations can be justified in light of the kind of social coexistence we seek to sustain. Related to this is the question of the unit of analysis employed in this paper. The argument does not presume the existence, nor the desirability, of value-normative cohesion at a global or universal level. Rather, it is concerned with historically and geographically situated societies, and more specifically with the shared public spaces of pluralistic, late-modern social contexts. References to ‘society’, ‘social cohesion’, or ‘shared values’ should therefore be understood in this limited sense, as referring to context-dependent and always provisional forms of coordination among individuals who nonetheless participate in common institutional and symbolic environments.

The *second* question is how to reconnect so-called ‘authentic individuals’ with the collective and public sphere. I shall argue that the public space should not resemble a psychologist’s office, where individuals are encouraged to explore their inner lives and ‘be themselves’ all the time. Instead, it should function more like the domain of the moral or social philosopher, who seeks to regulate interactions through interventions that harmonize and attune people to one another. In contrast to the prevailing emphasis on authenticity, the paper highlights the need for (1) sustainable forms of self-control and (2) the recognition that outward behaviour reflects the kind of moral person one aspires to be. In the public sphere, individuals should exhibit (3) mindfulness of others and a commitment to creating what Karen Stohr (2012) calls a ‘*moral neighbourhood*’. To sustain a civil society, people must also demonstrate (4) an enduring will to live together harmoniously and (5) an awareness of how their actions affect those around them. Finally, (6) social norms should not be seen merely as limitations on personal liberty but embraced as essential gatekeepers of civilization itself. Taken together, the paper aims to contribute to contemporary discussions of morality by elaborating the concept of ‘moral neighbourhoods’ as a bridge between classical virtue ethics and modern social psychology. Unlike punitive models that rely on direct and external enforcement – which is not to deny that such models may, in certain contexts, be effective – this framework emphasizes the subtle yet transformative power of interpersonal nudges and communal role modelling. It builds on Kantian ideas about duties and

on Aristotle's habituation theory to argue that moral behaviour is not merely a product of individual virtue but of shared environments that make ethical choices visible, desirable, and socially rewarding.

The paper is built in this way. It starts with providing a brief historical sketch to explain how contemporary society has entered what Charles Taylor (2007: 473) calls the '*age of authenticity*'. It continues with the challenges that come with this ideal, and then argues that we need to reclaim social norms and embrace the ideal of '*moral improvement*'. The key idea is that 'authenticity' should not mean the unfiltered expression of one's inner self at all times, especially in social contexts where unrestrained behaviour can undermine shared values and social harmony. Authenticity, as I shall argue, does not require the constant expression of raw emotions, personal inclinations and identity claims; rather, it involves striving to embody one's '*better moral self*' through deliberate, outward actions. With particular reference to the work of Stohr (2012 & 2019) I explain that '*moral stagecraft*' is a vital tool for bridging the gap between individual imperfections and societal ideals. No one is perfect, and our emotions or moral reasoning often fall short. Through the deliberate performance of roles and behaviours, individuals can still contribute to the moral fabric of society while working on their inner development. In that sense, '*moral stagecraft*' – acting in a way that adheres to social norms that support moral ideals – is not hypocritical because it is not about pretending to be someone you're not. Instead, it is about aligning one's actions with values that may not yet fully resonate internally. 'Authenticity', then, is best understood as a long-term aspiration rather than an immediate, unfiltered expression of the self. In other words, authenticity is not about rejecting roles or social norms but about striving to become the best version of oneself within the framework of shared values and mutual respect. At its core, authenticity is tied to '*positive freedom*'.

The age of authenticity

Authenticity – "*the leading member of a set of values that includes sincere, essential, natural, original, and real*" (Lindholm 2008: 1) – has become a pervasive demand across nearly every sphere of life (Boyle 2003; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Lindholm 2008; Taylor 1991, 2007). From the food we eat to our homes, workplaces, entertainment, and extending to education, politics, religion, and our personal, sexual, and professional identities, authenticity dominates modern discourse. This obsession is mirrored in the burgeoning market for personal coaches, self-help books, and psychospiritual training programs (Furedi 2004). Although many sociologists and philosophers agree that few ideals hold greater cultural significance today than 'self-actualization' through personal desires, it is a relatively recent development, having emerged within the past two centuries (Ferrara 1998; Lipovetsky 2021, Taylor 1991, 2007; Varga 2012). In traditional societies, individuals were expected to conform to collective norms, with personal desires subordinated to communal expectations. Even in Ancient Greece, the idea of authenticity as we understand it today was absent.

Philosophical schools such as Stoicism and Epicureanism, for example, emphasized self-mastery, the rejection of false values, and alignment with ‘universal reason’, ‘nature’, and ‘cosmic order’. All this eschewed any notion of individual identity as a central goal (Lipovetsky 2021).

It was only during the Enlightenment that we witnessed a crucial shift, in which authenticity came into focus as a new moral ideal. From the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, authenticity was mainly understood as a resistance to societal conformity. Two paradigms of authenticity emerged: ‘*self-discovery*’ and ‘*self-creation*’ (e.g. Lipovetsky 2021). Rousseau – who believed that the good nature of the ‘noble savage’ was being eroded by civilisation – inspired the first paradigm, emphasizing alignment with one’s inner truth and the rejection of external expectations. Romantic artists and bohemians embraced this ethos by valuing spontaneity, freedom, and nonconformity while rejecting materialism and bourgeois ideals. Nietzsche is one of the key authors of the second paradigm who defined authenticity as the creation of one’s own values and self-transformation. Building on this, thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre emphasized authenticity as a process of self-definition through individual choices and actions, viewing it not as an inherent trait but as a construct. Heidegger (1962), for example, described how, in everyday life, individuals conform to *das Man* (the They), which eases personal responsibility but erodes individuality, rendering life detached and superficial. For Sartre (1992), life is a creation where the authentic individual, guided by the principle that “*existence precedes essence*” defines themselves through actions and choices. Poets such as Baudelaire and Wilde exemplified this approach, transforming their lives into personal works of art.

The 1960s and 1970s ushered in a ‘second phase of authenticity’, fuelled by countercultural movements that expanded its pursuit from intellectual elites to youth-led revolutions (Lipovetsky 2021; Taylor 2007). These movements rejected institutional structures such as work, family, and religion, seeking liberation from alienation and celebrating communal living through festivals, communes, and love-ins. Authenticity during this time was not just about individual self-expression but also about forming new ways of living, stimulating genuine relationships, and creating alternative lifestyles. This communal ethos coexisted with a growing emphasis on self-realization and personal autonomy, which reflected the deeply individualistic foundation of the counterculture.

Since the late 1970s, society has entered the ‘third and current phase of authenticity’, marked by its democratization and commercialization. So, once the domain of cultural elites, authenticity has now become a universal ethos, deeply ingrained in advertising, reality TV, corporate branding, consumerism, and therapeutic culture (Boyle 2003; Furedi 2004; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Lindholm 2008). This so-called ‘*hypermodern authenticity*’ (Lipovetsky 2021) embodies radical individualism, prominently reflected in movements such as LGBTQIA+ advocacy, transhumanism, and cultural hybridity. The quest for authenticity, often celebrated as a path to liberation, has paradoxically become a vehicle for conformity. Once an ideal of originality, authenticity has

been transformed into a product, a lifestyle, and a marketing tool. As Gilmore and Pine (2007) observe, “*Authenticity is what consumers want.*” This desire for authenticity is commodified into goods, lifestyles, and behavioural norms that promise to make us ‘more real’. Yet, as Heath and Potter (2004) and Slater (2008) argue, it ultimately becomes just another brand, offering a curated and polished version of authenticity. Far from providing an escape from artificiality, it reinforces the very constructs it claims to oppose, reducing authenticity to a marketable illusion (Campbell, 2005). The many externalisations of ‘authenticity’ are ‘*simulacra*’, to use the concept of Jean Baudrillard (1995). In his theory, simulacra are representations or copies of things that no longer have an original or real counterpart. For Baudrillard, simulacra blur the distinction between reality and representation, where the imitation becomes more real or influential than what it originally referred to. As such, they create what he calls a ‘*hyperreality*’. Consider, for example, the handmade, organic or ‘authentic’ products such as artisanal food or ‘authentic’ travel experiences. These products are sold as gateways to a real, pure lifestyle, but are in fact stylised simulations of authenticity. Or take television shows and social media, where individuals present themselves as ‘authentic’ and ‘unfiltered’. Yet, their online personas are often meticulously crafted, showcasing curated performances of highly stylized lives. In the digital arena, individuals are pressured to market themselves as unique brands, constantly striving to seduce, move, and persuade others to recognize their value (Lipovetsky 2017). It is this very societal dynamic which has given rise to a landscape dominated by fake news, avatars, silicone bodies, artificial intelligence, and kitsch.

This brief overview clarifies that the ideals of ‘*being yourself*’ and ‘*becoming who you are*’, once celebrated by intellectual and artistic elites, have now become dominant cultural imperatives. While these ideals have undoubtedly driven emancipation and social struggles for recognition – feminist movements, LGBTQ+ rights, multiculturalism, and others – they also raise critical questions. How can a society of ‘authentic selves’ coexist without constant friction? Does the emphasis on personal authenticity conflict with social institutions that require restraint, discipline, or self-limitation? Indeed, when individuals are guided by the mantra ‘*My life, my rules!*’, external norms may come to be perceived as obstacles, turning the social world into a battleground of competing desires and expectations. In the remainder of this paper, I argue that navigating this tension requires reconciling authenticity with shared values, norms, and collective responsibilities. Without such a balance, authenticity risks undermining the forms of coordination and mutual orientation that make shared social life possible. This claim should not be understood as presupposing a static or fully consensual conception of social harmony. After all, social life is characterized by ongoing processes of conflict, negotiation, and the provisional stabilization of norms. The question, rather, is how particular forms of authenticity interact with these fragile and contested arrangements. As I will argue, unfettered authenticity must therefore be tempered. Through moral role-playing and pretense, adherence to shared social scripts, and a

renewed commitment to the public good, individuals can cultivate forms of self-restraint that contribute to a society in which people can live well together. It is also important to emphasize that the contemporary emphasis on authenticity should not be understood as an entirely unprecedented rupture with earlier phases of modern individuation. As Norbert Elias (2000) and others have shown, successive waves of individualization have repeatedly disrupted established norms and institutions, only to give rise to new, often fragile, forms of social regulation and moral expectations. In this sense, the current moment may be understood as part of a longer historical pattern of destabilization and reconfiguration. At the same time, the present emphasis on authenticity appears to differ in degree rather than in kind, insofar as it is more pervasive, more reflexively articulated, and more tightly coupled to consumer culture, digital media, and therapeutic vocabularies. These features may render the consolidation of new normative equilibria more difficult, more contested, or more prolonged than in earlier periods – without implying that such consolidation is impossible.

‘My life, my rules, our loss’

This relentless pressure not only to *be* authentic but also to *perform* authenticity is a cultural imperative. ‘Authenticity’ therefore is both a descriptive (sociological) and normative (moral) concept (Varga 2012). Some of our most influential sociologists and philosophers have raised their voice in criticizing this imperative, as it gives rise to boundless self-expression, subjectivism, or narcissism rampant in Western culture, further eroding community spirit and undermining trust in modern institutions. I’ll briefly summarize some of the main claims as it helps to understand why ‘authenticity’ needs a renewed moral reflection – as I will argue it needs to be redefined as an aspirational alignment with one’s better moral self.

Christopher Lasch (1979) critiques the modern focus on authenticity, linking it to a ‘*culture of narcissism*’, where self-interest and instant gratification replace community, tradition, and meaningful relationships. Modern capitalism stimulates this narcissism through consumption, advertising, and external validation, eroding traditional sources of stability like family and religion. Lasch warns that this self-absorption and the rise of a ‘*therapeutic ethos*’ lead to a decline of societal cohesion and to ‘*diminishing expectations*’. People no longer strive for large, transformative goals but settle for managing their personal anxieties and coping with social and economic uncertainty. Similarly, Robert Bellah et al. (1985) explore two forms of individualism that dominate modern society: *expressive* and *utilitarian*. ‘Expressive individualism’ emphasizes personal authenticity, self-expression, and the pursuit of one’s unique identity, rooted in Romanticism. In contrast, ‘utilitarian individualism’ focuses on pure self-interest, efficiency, and material success, inspired by the rational Enlightenment ideals. Both forms prioritize individual fulfilment over communal well-being, weakening shared values and undermining civic engagement.

Richard Sennett (1977) laments the *'fall of public man'* and the *'tyranny of intimacy'*, noting how the dominance of personal emotions and identity in civic life have led to a decline of impersonal public spaces, further eroding collective engagement. Also Charles Taylor (1989; 1991; 2007) critiques the modern conception of authenticity, arguing that the 1960s marked a pivotal period of change. During this time, general wealth and education levels rose, liberal democracy expanded, consumer culture emerged, religion declined, a youth-oriented market developed, and numerous technological and scientific advancements – such as the birth control pill and television – reshaped society. These developments, Taylor (1989) argues, led to the degeneration of modern individualism, reducing personal ethics to the self-serving question of “What’s in it for me?”. People detach from traditional ethical horizons and become increasingly focused on amusement and consumption (see also Barber 2007; Postman 1985). This shift narrows their perspective, as attention becomes fixated on individual lives, disconnected from broader frameworks. Such individualism results in a one-sided preoccupation with the self, flattening life and impoverishing it of deeper meaning.

What these intellectual heavyweights have in common is their focus on the tension between the individual and the collective, identifying self-obsession and the relentless pursuit of being true to oneself as central issues. Decades earlier, José Ortega y Gasset (1957: 97) had already described the 20th century as the *“self-satisfied age”*, characterized by the average European man’s lack of drive for achievement and his fixation on lifestyle choices and material well-being. He in particular warned of what he called *“the psychology of the spoiled child”* (ibid.) which manifests in four distinct ways. *First*, it stimulates a sense of power and triumph in the average person, leading them to regard themselves as inherently complete. By this, Ortega does not mean that individuals experience actual political or material power, but rather a subjective sense of self-sufficiency and entitlement, hence the belief that one’s own perspectives, desires, and inclinations require no external justification, discipline, or deference to tradition, authority, or shared standards. To regard oneself as ‘inherently complete’ is thus to experience one’s moral and intellectual outlook as already finished and beyond the need for self-correction, cultivation, or restraint. *Second*, this self-righteousness causes them to reject external authority, refusing to listen and accept criticism, or consider the perspectives of others. *Third*, this inflated self-perception creates a desire to dominate and behave as if they were the only individuals that matter. *Finally*, it produces a fervent urge to impose their often-vulgar opinions without respect or reservation. For Ortega y Gasset, this so-called *‘mass man’* – found across all social strata – sees happiness as an entitlement and a right (not necessarily in a strictly legal sense), and blames others or external circumstances for any obstacles to achieving it. He does not show gratitude anymore for culture, science and traditions. Mary Ann Glendon (1990) aptly describes this phenomenon as the rise of *‘lonely rights bearers’*. This proliferation of individual rights, however, disrupts social order and hierarchy, resulting in what Ortega Y Gasset beliefs are *‘absurd forms of equality’*.

After all, when strict equality is applied indiscriminately beyond the political sphere – where equality before the law is a foundational principle – it leads to a lamentable flattening of society. In such a democratic context, where everyone views themselves as equal in every respect – a society akin to the dodo’s proclamation in *Alice in Wonderland* that “*All have won and must have prizes*” – it becomes increasingly difficult for figures of authority such as politicians, teachers, physicians, intellectuals, police officers, train conductors, scholars, or parents to gain voluntary compliance (Levräu 2023). The mass-man seems to resist the idea that “*I did it my way*” is not always the best approach. This aligns with what Carol Dweck (2006) describes as a ‘*fixed mindset*’ which also sheds light on why contemporary individuals often exhibit unwarranted confidence in situations where seeking expert advice would be the wiser course of action. Such overconfidence exemplifies the Dunning-Kruger effect (1999), which can be summarized by the defiant retorts: “*Who are you to tell me what to do?*” and “*I know better than you...*”

Re-uniting authenticity with the collective

The aforementioned critiques highlight the rise of a hollow, therapeutic self, shaped by consumer culture and psychological self-help ideologies, which has led to a flattening of moral horizons. As a result, shallow forms of individual self-expression and emotional self-absorption are often prioritized over communal belonging, traditions, social institutions, and civic or (religious) commitments. This shift has led to the emergence of a superficial, narcissistic ego that rejects external obligations as paternalistic, insisting: “I alone decide who I am and how I live.” Understanding this dynamic allows us to more precisely frame the ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ positions in debates over authenticity – with liberals emphasizing personal autonomy and self-invention, while conservatives stress the importance of rootedness in tradition, shared values, and external sources of meaning.

The 18th-century ideal of staying true to oneself or constructing one’s identity has, in late-modern society, allied with the liberal principle of free self-determination. *Liberals*, reluctant to impose on others, are eager to embrace Mill’s (1975) ‘*damage principle*’ – as long as no harm is caused, they think, “Whatever floats your boat.” Their emphasis is on establishing a just societal ‘*basic structure*’. Rawls (1999: 6) famously defined the ‘basic structure’ – “(...) *the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation. By major institutions I understand the political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements*” – as the primary subject of justice. Since the focus is on fair institutions, the idea is that as long as individuals comply with fair laws, ‘anything goes’. In that sense they prioritize ‘*negative liberty*’ (Berlin 1969) – freedom from interference by other people and the state – neglecting to differentiate between a ‘shallow authentic self’ and the ‘moral ideal of authenticity’. *Conservatives and communitarians* like Alasdair MacIntyre (2007),

Michael Sandel (1982), and Charles Taylor (1989), however, contend that authentic identities are rooted in history, culture, and traditions. According to Taylor (1991: 33), for example, authenticity can only thrive when grounded in the ‘*language*’ of community, traditions, and shared values. Recognition from others is essential, as the self is shaped through dialogue and interaction. He emphasizes that authenticity requires ‘connectedness’ and ‘engagement,’ rejecting the superficiality of radical individualism. To be authentic is to embrace the “*horizons of significance*” (Taylor 1991: 52) – the collective frameworks of meaning that make individual choice and expression possible. Taylor’s (1991; 2007) authenticity concept does not provide a license for self-absorption or retreat from social ties. Being true to yourself is not the same as being obsessed with yourself. Authentic freedom is not indulging whims or rejecting all constraints but understanding and navigating shared moral boundaries. In that sense, one could argue that unlike the liberal interpretation which does not see a problem with egoism or hedonism, true authenticity embodies ‘*positive liberty*’ (Berlin, 1969) – the ability to govern oneself and realize one’s true potential by acting in accordance with one’s rational will, free from internal constraints such as ignorance or desires. As the mentioned authors argue, this type of liberty presupposes a strong social dimension. This does not amount to an unqualified endorsement of communal belonging as such. The value of ethical lifeworlds depends on their moral orientation. Only forms of communal belonging that are compatible with values of equal respect, civility, and tolerance can plausibly be said to enhance positive liberty. The upshot is that the modern-day conflation of authenticity with egoism and hedonism is misguided. A truly authentic person critically examines the quality of their pleasures, resists the lures of consumerism, and rejects enslavement to desires and greed. Authenticity, therefore, is not a retreat into the (narcissistic) self but a commitment to an ongoing, meaningful dialogue with the world. It involves continuous reflection on one’s responsibilities to others. Someone who is genuinely honest with themselves, for example, will persistently question what forms of engagement with others they ought to pursue and how to live responsibly in a shared world.

If we take all this into consideration, it becomes clear that there is an urge to re-unite ‘authenticity’ with the ‘collective’. In the remainder of this paper I will explain that a vision of authenticity – rooted in positive liberty and social responsibility – provides a constructive framework for navigating the challenges of hyper-individualism in late-modern societies. In contrast to current liberal tendencies that prioritize self-expression and associated group formation, and the conservative appeal that causes people to withdraw in separate and more traditional communities, I will argue that it is key to (1) develop a sustainable form of self-control over one’s impulses, and (2) to recognize that outward behaviour serves as a reflection of the moral person you aspire to be. Participation in public life is less about being yourself all the time and more about aligning your behaviour with a ‘*moral ego-ideal*’. At this juncture, ‘*social norms*’ become critical, as they act as signposts for those aspiring to uphold

universal values like respect. Moreover (3), people must understand that the public sphere is not simply an extension of their private lives or convictions. Instead, public behaviour should reflect an attunement to others. The public sphere is where individuals can display a gentle *'mindfulness of others'*, gradually transforming it into what Karen Stohr (2019: 101) calls a *'moral neighbourhood – "a jointly constructed normative space, built and sustained primarily through social practices and conventions in particular settings."* In such a neighbourhood, people help one another act in accordance with their better selves, enabling them to grow into their moral ideals. An essential precondition for this is a 'shared sense of belonging'. As Ortega y Gasset noted in the introduction to this paper, civilization requires (4) the enduring will to live together and overcome differences. Without this sense of connection, people are less likely to view themselves through the eyes of others, thereby reducing the likelihood of experiencing shame when they fall short of social expectations. We thus must avoid the paradoxical situation in which a dominant social norm dictates that norms themselves are unnecessary. Instead, maintaining healthy inhibitions and respect for norms is vital for the greater good of society. This responsibility is collective: by adhering to social norms, individuals do play a role as they reinforce the validity of these norms and encourage others to follow suit. People should thus (5) remain keenly aware of the *'spillover effects'* of their behaviour on the broader social fabric. The contemporary emphasis on authenticity thus raises a series of normative questions about how individual self-expression relates to shared expectations, social coordination, and moral evaluation. If individuals increasingly understand public behaviour as an extension of their inner selves, questions arise concerning norm compliance, the moral status of social conventions, and the role of values in structuring collective life. To address these questions in a systematic way, I will elaborate on these five closely interconnected points and will introduce a set of conceptual distinctions – between norms and values, between descriptive regularities and normative commitments, and between conformity and moral justification – that will serve as the theoretical framework for the analysis that follows.

Social norms

Social norms define what is deemed 'appropriate' or 'decent' within specific contexts and communities (Bicchieri 2006; see also Wenzel and Woodyatt 2005). These (un)written rules guide behaviour, indicating what one should or should not do (Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren 1990). While some norms are local, others have universal appeal. For instance, in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, greeting typically involves a handshake, whereas in the French speaking part, a fleeting kiss on the cheek is customary. In Tibet, sticking out one's tongue is a traditional gesture of respect, while in most other countries it's a sign of disregard (Lundmark, 2009). Such differences can create multicultural unease (Laegaard 2011), but they need not deter interaction – I will return to this point when introducing the concept of *'values'*. Norms also govern

when and how other norms are overridden. Consider the rule *'First come, first served,'* which dictates queue behaviour. However, if someone enters a waiting room visibly injured and in distress, this rule is set aside for *'Necessity knows no laws.'* Failure to recognize this shift would render one socially rude or insensitive. Therefore, and despite their adaptability, norms often carry what Jonathan Wolff (2020) terms *'deontic force'* – a moral weight that makes their violation taboo. For example, paying someone on a crowded train, where all seats are occupied, for their seat might be economically rational – it is a *'Pareto to improvement'* – yet it evokes moral discomfort because it violates the norm of *'First come, first served.'* Such norms are not tied to the nature of the good itself (the seats) but to ideas about how society should regulate scarcity and fairness. Social norms also serve an *'instrumental function'* by facilitating orderly, predictable, and harmonious social interactions (Bicchieri 2006; Cialdini 1984). They act as a *'societal lubricant'* (Laegaard 2011), fostering trust and mutual understanding. Adhering to norms signals alignment with shared expectations, affirming group membership and earning social approval (Henrich and Henrich 2007; Heatherton 2010).

Beyond their deontic and instrumental roles, norms embody *moral meaning* by translating abstract values into practice (Calhoun 2012; Bicchieri 2006). Values such as civility and honesty represent ideals of what is *'good'* or *'worth pursuing'*, and social norms align individual behaviour with these collective principles. By making values concrete, norms shape decision-making and conduct across various contexts. For example, the value of *'civility'* is reflected in norms like allowing passengers to exit a train before boarding, queuing in turn, or expressing gratitude. Likewise, *'tolerance'* is upheld through norms that discourage berating those with differing opinions or imposing one's beliefs through force. Ultimately, values such as *'civility'* and *'tolerance'* communicate *'respect'* – treating others as equals, neither superior nor inferior (Stohr 2012). Recognizing that values can be expressed through diverse norms is essential for social cohesion in multicultural societies. For instance, if someone declines a handshake for cultural or religious reasons but offers a smile or bow instead, the focus can shift to the shared underlying value of respect rather than the differing cultural norms. Cultivating *'cultural openness'* and empathy can help mitigate intercultural tensions, encouraging a willingness to embrace *'reasonable accommodations'* depending on the context and the stakes involved (Beaman 2017).

However, not all norms align with moral values; norms must therefore be assessed in light of the underlying moral landscape they presuppose. This is also why Immanuel Kant (1996a: 49) famously argues: *"It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will."* What characterizes a person of good will is the capacity to choose reasons for action that reflect a commitment to morality. According to Kant, all individuals equally bear this moral responsibility. A virtuous person is thus someone who overcomes the temptation to choose easier or more pleasant options and instead commits to the morally

right course of action. Virtue, Kant writes, is “*the moral strength of a human being’s will in fulfilling his duty*” (Kant 1996b: 533), a strength that is essential for sustaining one’s dedication to morality over time. A morally virtuous individual therefore does not act out of self-interest or inclination, but out of an overriding sense of duty, adhering to the categorical imperative, which Kant conceives as the moral law grounded in human rationality – even if individuals do not always consciously recognize it. While Kant understands the capacity for moral reasoning as universal, the concrete recognition and application of moral principles is always mediated by historical conditions, social practices, and available moral vocabularies. One formulation of the categorical imperative entails respecting others by treating them always as ends in themselves and never merely as means to an end. From this perspective, it becomes clear why a terrorist’s loyalty to a cause may demonstrate perseverance as a valuable character trait but nevertheless lacks moral worth insofar as it disregards the respect owed to humanity. Similarly, harmful norms – such as those enforcing gender inequality or racial segregation – fail to uphold higher-order ideals like respect for the moral equality of all people. In such cases, norm-breaking behaviour may become morally justified, taking the form of legitimate civil disobedience (Rawls 1999), as exemplified by Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her bus seat. This claim should not necessarily be understood as implying that individuals possess a timeless or context-independent ability to immediately distinguish harmful from morally justified norms. Moral judgment is itself historically and socially mediated, shaped by prevailing moral vocabularies, institutional arrangements, and forms of habituation. As a result, practices that are now widely recognized as morally indefensible – such as slavery, racial segregation, or gender inequality – were for long periods embedded in normative frameworks that rendered them socially intelligible and morally permissible. The capacity to critically assess and eventually reject such norms emerges only gradually, through processes of moral learning, social struggle, and the transformation of shared evaluative standards (Killen & Dahl 2021; Habermas 1990/1991).

It is important to emphasize, in this context, that norms and values do not necessarily coincide. Norms regulate behaviour within specific social groups and contexts, and some may emerge that are misaligned with, or even directly opposed to, more general moral values. Subgroups can develop internal normative expectations that stabilize identity or cohesion within the group while simultaneously conflicting with broader ideals of equality, respect, or justice. The existence of such ‘norm-value dissonance’ underscores the need for a normative perspective that does not equate social conformity with moral legitimacy. The fact that a behaviour is normatively expected within a given group does not, by itself, confer moral justification. On the contrary, it is precisely in situations of this dissonance that critical moral reflection and, at times, justified norm-breaking become necessary.

The link between seemingly arbitrary social behaviours – shaped by time and place – and enduring moral principles of respect underscores why individuals

cannot present themselves as wholly unique in every situation. While there is some flexibility in how people engage with norms, outright disregard often leads to social disapproval. For example, showing up late to an appointment or wearing an overly flashy outfit to a funeral may not be illegal, but they are widely considered inappropriate. Such actions can signal a lack of consideration for others and even for oneself (Stohr 2012). Or consider a noisy student in a classroom: their behaviour not only disrupts other students' ability to learn and the teacher's capacity to teach but also damages their own reputation, making them appear untrustworthy and self-centred. Predictable behaviour, as Dixon & McAuley (2006) observe, is vital for mutual comfort and trust in social interactions. So, while some view norms as infringing on '*negative liberty*' – defined by Isaiah Berlin (1969) as a 'freedom from interference' – this perspective overlooks the significant social benefits they offer. Without norms, everyday interactions would be filled with uncertainty and awkwardness, hampering effective communication and cooperation. Social norms, therefore, enable '*positive liberty*' – a 'freedom to realize one's goals and aspirations'. For example, simple conversational conventions, like starting a conversation with "Nice weather, isn't it?" or "Do you come here often?" help people engage with each other in a predictable and comfortable way while still allowing for individuality. Conversely, the absence of such norms can lead to miscommunication or discomfort, particularly in sensitive contexts. The *#MeToo movement*, for example, illustrates the consequences of unregulated social behaviour. More specifically, the emergence of this movement can be understood as a response to professional environments – most notably within the entertainment industry – that were insufficiently regulated by social norms grounded in values such as civility, equal respect, and role-appropriate conduct. In these contexts, the absence of clear professional scripts, shared expectations, and a stable professional jargon blurred the boundaries between personal inclination and professional interaction. As a result, behaviour that was experienced by some as harmless, humorous, or flattering could simultaneously be experienced by others as degrading, coercive, or threatening. The *#MeToo movement* thus did not reveal an excess of normative regulation, but rather the moral costs of its absence. As Bern Rasmussen and Yaouzis (2020) note, social norms – such as adopting professional jargon in the workplace – guide interactions and set clear expectations, helping to create an environment where both men and women feel respected. Professional jargon functions as a form of 'role-playing' – a concept which I will further elaborate in the sections below – aligning individuals with workplace norms. In settings where macho or derogatory language goes unchallenged – where people do not resist vices like contempt, arrogance, and ridicule – people may not receive the respect they deserve. This highlights the role of social norms of civility as they function as moral safeguards, protecting boundaries and fostering both positive freedom and societal cohesion. Even though we don't necessarily like all people, we must actively acknowledge the moral worth of them and must accept people as imperfect and resist our own tendencies to see ourselves as superior

(or inferior). Adhering to basic social norms allows us to express at least an outward form of equal respect. This does not mean we must admire everyone in the same way, but it does mean that we owe all individuals a fundamental level of moral recognition, regardless of their flaws or past actions. This perspective aligns with Darwall's (1977) distinction between '*appraisal respect*' – which must be earned through commendable actions – and '*recognition respect*' which is due to all rational beings simply by virtue of their humanity.

Normcompliance

The 'deontic' (it feels as a duty), 'moral' (it is related to values and moral duties of equality) and 'instrumental' (it makes social life more predictable) functions of social norms explain why sober people often feel uneasy around someone who is drunk, as the latter's unpredictability breaches social norms. It also explains why seeing litter triggered my irritation. It reflects a disdain for shared rules. At least subconsciously, during my daily walk to my office, I must have thought "Who do they think they are, believing they don't have to follow the social rules of keeping the streets tidy?!" When people observe others disregarding social norms, they are more likely to follow suit, highlighting the interaction between '*injunctive norms*' and '*descriptive norms*' (Bicchieri 2006; Cialdini 2003). 'Injunctive norms', which dictate what individuals ought to do or what is deemed desirable by society, are grounded in a sense of moral obligation and the pursuit of social approval. Their influence is contingent upon the belief that others expect adherence to these norms and will respond with approval or disapproval accordingly. In contrast, 'descriptive norms' pertain to actual behaviours observed within a specific group or community. Individuals tend to conform to descriptive norms not only to align with others but also because they perceive such behaviours as effective or appropriate within a given context. While injunctive norms motivate behaviour by appealing to moral obligations and social sanctions, descriptive norms do so by signaling what is commonly practiced or deemed effective. Many injunctive norms eventually become legal norms, turning social expectations into enforceable regulations (Bicchieri 2006). The legal system reinforces injunctive norms by imposing sanctions for non-compliance or by legitimizing prevailing societal values. For instance, anti-discrimination laws reflect the injunctive norm that all individuals should be treated equitably, even if discriminatory behaviour persists in practice (as reflected in descriptive norms) within certain contexts. Conversely, the law can also seek to reshape descriptive norms by encouraging new behaviours. Smoking bans, for example, not only address public health concerns but also contribute to the shifting attitudes towards smoking over time. In this way, injunctive norms set moral standards for behaviour, while the legal system plays a crucial role in institutionalizing and enforcing them, helping to align social ideals with actual practices.

A growing body of research demonstrates how the distinction between injunctive and descriptive norms helps explain both adherence to and disregard

for social norms (e.g. Bicchieri 2006; Cialdini 2003). When these norms align – such as in a city where littering is rare – orderly behaviour tends to follow. However, when they diverge, as in cities where littering persists, descriptive norms often prevail. People tend to imitate what they see, reinforcing the idea that actions speak louder than words. This dynamic ties into the *‘broken windows theory’* (Kelling & Wilson, 1982), which suggests visible signs of disorder – like graffiti or trash – signal a breakdown in norms and encourages further violations. People also rationalize norm violations for personal gain, exemplifying the *‘tragedy of the commons’* (Hardin 1968), where individual self-interest undermines shared resources. Over time, such behaviours can lead to *‘cultural pollution’* or even cultural shifts (Kernohan 1998), as minor transgressions become normalized. For instance, tolerating derogatory remarks about migrants can pave the way for broader societal acceptance of discrimination. Also Kant (1996b) warned that indulging in negative gossip is like sinking into quicksand as it cultivates an atmosphere of contempt and even hatred, making it harder to develop the attitudes of love and respect. The endless stream of snarky comments on social media, for example, only reinforces this cycle; consuming negativity leads to a similar disposition in ourselves, which then seeps into our interactions with others. Kant, therefore, treats vices like contagious diseases: if we inhale an air of defamation, we become infected, and by spreading it, we infect others. As I will explain, to counter this, we must ‘mask up’ and keep such toxicity out of our shared moral environment by behaving according to our better version. Similarly, repeated violations of a norm like “Don’t leave garbage on the streets.” can erode the norm entirely, as individuals become less likely to uphold it when others consistently disregard it. This taps into an innate sense of fairness as no one wants to feel like the ‘crazy Hanky’ who carries their trash while others litter. That is exactly what people mean when saying that there is moral decay (Herman 1997).

The *Focus theory of normative conduct*, developed by Cialdini and colleagues, provides valuable insights into combating the erosion of norm compliance by effectively leveraging both descriptive and injunctive norms. Supporting research demonstrates that descriptive norms and injunctive norms produce distinct behavioural responses (Reno, Cialdini and Kallgren 1993) and guide action only when activated (Kallgren, Reno and Cialdini 2000). Bicchieri et al. (2022), for example, found that providing information about anonymous strangers’ behaviour (a clue about the descriptive norm) can backfire if it reveals widespread non-compliance. Emphasising, for example, that many people litter can inadvertently normalize that unwanted behaviour (Cialdini et al. 2006). Instead, targeted information about socially similar others is more effective, highlighting the importance of social proximity cues (Bicchieri et al. 2022). This aligns with broader research showing significant differences in behaviour toward socially proximate versus socially distant individuals (for a meta-analysis, see Lane 2006). Appealing to moral obligations (the injunctive norms) is particularly effective in encouraging prosocial behaviour, especially when descriptive norms reflect undesirable actions. Cialdini et al. (2006),

for example, argue that messages should focus solely on injunctive norms and emphasize what people *should not* do, as this approach better aligns behaviour with socially preferred outcomes. Research suggests that injunctive norms tend to be most persuasive when framed negatively, as negative information naturally attracts more attention and scrutiny (Baumeister et al. 2001; Rozin and Royzman 2001). However, public officials sometimes overlook this insight by using negatively framed descriptive messages that inadvertently reinforce the very behaviours they aim to discourage. For instance, a sign that reads, “Many visitors steal wood” unintentionally normalizes theft rather than condemning it.

This well-documented interdependence among individuals underpins the concept of ‘*nudging*’ (Thaler and Sunstein 2009), which involves subtly guiding people toward desired behaviours while preserving their autonomy. For example, signs that state “90% of residents have already filed their tax returns” motivate others to do the same, leveraging social proof. Similarly, hotel guests are more likely to reuse towels when informed that most previous occupants of their room did so. Unlike traditional approaches – such as legislation and punishment, education and information, or financial incentives – nudging is non-coercive, non-paternalistic, and cost-effective. It recognizes that humans are not purely rational actors but social and emotional beings whose decisions are often subconscious. A compelling example of effective nudging is the ‘*Don’t Mess with Texas*’ campaign, which significantly reduced littering on Texas roads (McClure and Spence 2006). By associating cleanliness with Texan identity, the campaign instilled pride in maintaining clean roads. Through billboards, radio ads, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and celebrity endorsements, Texans were encouraged to view litter-free roads as a marker of good citizenship. Over time, this behaviour became internalized, demonstrating how descriptive norms (what people observe others doing) can reinforce injunctive norms (what people believe they ought to do).

Megalomaniac role-players

As I have explained, norm abiding behaviour emerges from shared expectations within a reference group and is sustained by two mechanisms: normative expectations (beliefs about what others think should be done and would disapprove of if violated) and empirical expectations (beliefs about what most people actually do). The dynamic interplay between the injunctive and descriptive norms can be an important tool for policymakers and individuals who are directed towards moral improvement. Shifts in one can influence the other. For example, a decline in littering as a descriptive norm can strengthen injunctive norms discouraging littering, while increased littering can weaken societal disapproval of such behaviour. This evolution of norms underscores their fluidity and highlights the need to address both empirical and normative expectations in policy design. Laws, punishments, or incentives alone are often insufficient to change behaviour if the underlying social norms remain intact (Bicchieri 2006). At this precise moment, every individual assumes a distinct

role – one I will refer to as the ‘*megalomaniac*’ role – in the collective construction of what Stohr (2019) terms a ‘*moral neighbourhood*’. It is important to clarify that moral neighbourhoods and practices of ‘moral stagecraft’ are not conceived here as exclusively institutional arrangements, nor as purely individual moral initiatives. Rather, they operate across multiple social levels. At the micro level, they involve everyday acts of self-restraint, role-playing, and exemplary behaviour. At the meso level, they are sustained by informal group norms, shared expectations, and patterns of mutual adjustment. At the macro level, institutional actors – such as local governments or organizations – can support these dynamics through policies, symbolic interventions, or nudging strategies that reinforce desirable norms without resorting to coercion. The effectiveness of moral neighbourhoods lies precisely in the interaction between these levels, where individual conduct, social expectations, and institutional cues mutually reinforce one another.

In a moral neighbourhood, the principle of always ‘being yourself’ – centered on ‘living by your own rules’, ‘prioritizing self-interest’ and ‘yielding to inclinations’ – is replaced or at the very least, balanced by an emphasis on maintaining a ‘*façade*’ and acting in alignment with one’s ‘*morally better self*’. It is important to stress that acting in alignment with one’s ‘morally better self’ is not meant as a purely subjective or self-authorizing moral standard. The morally better self, as understood here, is not whatever an individual sincerely believes to be right, but a self-understanding that is critically oriented toward fundamental moral values such as equal respect, civility, and tolerance. Appeals to authenticity cannot therefore legitimize forms of behaviour that undermine these values, even when such behaviour is experienced as honest, courageous, or resistant to perceived ‘political correctness’. Where individuals invoke sincerity or truthfulness to justify exclusionary or degrading speech or conduct, the problem lies not in insufficient authenticity, but in a distorted or insufficiently critical conception of moral selfhood. This shift entails self-restraint and adopting behaviours that gradually shape individuals into their ideal moral selves. Public life becomes a stage where roles are played not out of insincerity but as part of a transformative process. Aristotle’s (2005) theory of virtues demonstrates this process: by consistently embodying virtues like modesty, sensitivity, and respect, these behaviours become internalized and develop into habitual qualities. For example, someone who consciously restrains their anger and chooses respectful communication will, over time, find this behaviour becoming second nature. In a moral neighbourhood, individuals view themselves as catalysts for change, fully aware of the mimetic dynamics outlined in the previous section. This positive form of ‘*megalomania*’ is far from the dictator’s delusion of grandeur; instead, it reflects the belief that one’s example can influence others. This aligns with Kant’s (1996a) categorical imperative: individuals *should* act as if their behaviour creates universal laws. For example, if someone adopts the maxim – Kant’s concept for a subjective principle of action – “I litter whenever it suits me”, they must recognize that universalizing this rule would render clean public spaces impossible. One

simply cannot both want a universal rule of littering and a clean public space. In this sense, Kant's moral philosophy rejects free-rider mentalities by insisting that one's actions must be fit for universal imitation. Acting as though your behaviour will inspire others reinforces the idea that small, principled actions may have far-reaching consequences.

This moral framework finds practical application in daily life. If litter frustrates you, take action – start picking up trash in your neighbourhood or try plogging. This small act can subtly encourage others to follow suit or, at the very least, discourage them from adding to the problem. Here, it is important to be reminded that social norms are continuously shaped by the cumulative actions of individuals. In settings as varied as elevators, buses, parks, or even online forums, implicit expectations guide behaviour. By adhering to these expectations and setting an example – a contribution to the descriptive norms – individuals help to realize a normative space where mutual respect becomes the standard. For instance, treating others politely reinforces a reciprocal expectation of respect, whereas toxic or disrespectful behaviour erodes civility and gives tacit permission for others to act similarly. Or when a driver stops to let a pedestrian cross, a simple wave in acknowledgement can go a long way. This gesture shows appreciation for the driver's behaviour, making them feel good and encouraging them to stop for pedestrians more often. People should be mindful of these ripple effects – especially political leaders, whose words and actions carry a magnified impact, as they are also moral leaders who are uniquely positioned to shape societal norms through example. The idea is that everyone, in their own way, can subtly influence those around them. 'Nudging' works by tapping into our natural tendency to mirror the behaviour we see. It highlights how countless small interactions shape the broader social landscape. It complements the broader idea of the moral neighbourhood as it underscores that countless small-scale interactions collectively shape societal norms. A person who picks up litter in a park, greets others with kindness, or gives up their seat for an elderly passenger models behaviour that others are likely to follow. These actions, though seemingly minor, contribute to a more respectful and cohesive social environment. However, the opposite is also true: behaviour that disregards decorum or social expectations – such as toxic language, overtly selfish actions, or public rudeness – degrades the moral fabric of society and encourages others to act in kind. Building a 'moral neighbourhood' means recognizing these everyday influences and reinforcing the positive ones. The moral neighbourhood bears resemblance with Kant's (1998) *'ethical commonwealth'*. Kant's *'kingdom of ends'* (1996a) is an ideal moral world where everyone treats each other with respect and follows universal moral laws. It is a guiding principle, a way to think about how people *should* act if they were perfectly moral. However, Kant knew that in the real world, people are not always moral, and societies need institutions to support moral progress. That's where the *'ethical commonwealth'* comes in – it is a practical project aimed at creating communities that encourage people to develop virtue and act morally. So, while the *'kingdom of ends'* is a thought-experiment about perfect morality,

the ‘*ethical commonwealth*’ is about actually building a society that promotes moral values. The creation of a ‘*moral neighbourhood*’ is an example where people behave as moral megalomaniacs. So, nudging, leading by example, role-playing, and adhering to shared norms are not just strategies for individual improvement; they are essential for cultivating a society where freedom, mutual respect, and collective well-being coexist harmoniously.

Mindfulness of others

Another example that demonstrates how these social principles can work in real life and can help to create a moral neighbourhood, is a specific policy implemented by the city of Rotterdam. The council has sought to address dangerous and antisocial cycling behaviour on the Erasmus Bridge (Markus, 2018). Policymakers, guided by social psychologists, implemented nudging techniques by marking arrows on the bike lanes to indicate the correct direction. They also painted the phrase “Shout boo at wrong-way cyclists” on the pavement – for clarification: in Dutch, these type of cyclists are called ‘*spookfietsers*’, in a literal translation this means ‘ghostriders’, therefore calling ‘Boo!’ makes sense – and installed a traffic light that activated when someone cycled against the flow. Cyclists heading in the right direction were ‘rewarded’ with a thumbs-up. As a result, bystanders did indeed shout “Boo!” at wrong-way cyclists, and violations decreased by 11%. The reduction of ‘ghostriders’ highlights the role of collective accountability in fostering moral neighbourhoods. Good behaviour is encouraged through positive reinforcement, while bad behaviour is discouraged through disapproval. Social feedback significantly influences how we act. Social norms are largely upheld through interpersonal surveillance and subtle enforcement (Henrich and Henrich 2007).

A reduction of 11% may not seem substantial, reflecting that people today resist being held to account by others. The emphasis on ‘being oneself,’ reinforced by the concept of ‘negative liberty,’ dismisses shame as an alienating emotion (“Why should I feel ashamed if I’m simply doing what I want and when what I do is beneficial for ‘Me, Myself and I?’”). When social norms, however, increasingly prioritize ‘being your authentic self’ over community obligations, it becomes vital to reemphasize this ‘*mindfulness of others*’. This underscores the importance of distinguishing between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ realms and emphasizes the need to thoughtfully choose how one presents oneself in public. Acting with calmness and restraint (even if one feels angry), for example, is an intentional effort to craft an image and narrative about oneself, aiming to elicit acceptance and appropriate responses from others. Drawing from Aristotle’s theory of habituation, one could claim that consistently acting respectfully can eventually lead to genuine respect. Although he obviously values honesty, even Kant (1996b 257) endorses some form of pretense as an essential element of social life. “*On the whole, the more civilized human beings are, the more they are actors. They adopt the illusion of affection, of respect for others, of modesty, and of unselfishness without deceiving anyone at all, because*

it is understood that nothing is meant sincerely by this. (...) And it is also very good that this happens in the world; for when human beings play these roles, eventually the virtues, whose illusion they have merely affected for a considerable length of time, will gradually really be aroused and merge into the disposition." Kant, thus, argues that appearing virtuous is more significant than we might think – not as mere deception, but as a way to cultivate genuine virtue.

Relying upon this Kantian insight, Stohr (2012, 2019, 2021) presents '*good manners*' as tools for moral development, mechanisms through which individuals refine their moral character over time. Within this framework, Stohr introduces the concept of '*moral stagecraft*', which highlights the importance of performing socially prescribed roles to uphold moral values. For instance, demonstrating decorum at a funeral – even when one's personal and authentic emotions are absent – shows respect for the solemnity of the occasion and the feelings of others. As Stohr argues, far from being hypocritical, this form of role-playing enables individuals to embody and express moral values, even when their immediate inclinations diverge. Acting respectfully, even when insincere, stimulates genuine respect and love, creating a positive feedback loop: fulfilling our moral duties makes us more inclined to like others, which in turn reinforces our virtuous behaviour. Pretending to be our better selves is not hypocrisy but a step toward becoming that self. If I fake enthusiasm for a friend's joy despite a rough day, I am not deceiving but striving toward the kindness I wish to embody. This is not the same as dishonesty for personal gain; rather, it is the practice of becoming the person I aspire to be. Good manners enable this transformation. By living the illusion of moral goodness, we gradually turn it into reality. By adopting such roles, people embrace mutual respect and social harmony, making it possible to engage in moral life even when internal moral reasoning or emotions fall short. This argument complements Sennett's (1977) critique of the diminishing boundaries between public and private life. Historically, the public sphere functioned as a space for formal, role-based interactions, where personal emotions were set aside to prioritize shared norms and decorum. In today's society, however, this boundary has become blurred, with personal self-expression increasingly encroaching upon public roles. Sennett cautions that this '*tyranny of intimacy*' weakens social cohesion by prioritizing individual authenticity over collective norms, causing people to withdraw into their own private worlds. Together, Stohr and Sennett make a compelling case for the importance of outward behaviour and role-playing as stabilizing forces in both moral and social life. By challenging the modern focus on unrestricted self-expression, they highlight how deliberate actions, grounded in shared values, help to sustain communal bonds and cultivate an environment conducive to moral growth.

Moral stagecraft is a deliberate and constructive way of stimulating both personal growth and societal cohesion. Consider, for instance, someone who refuses to laugh at a racist joke in public. By withholding laughter, one implicitly calls on bystanders to join their silent disapproval. A well-functioning moral neighbourhood involves a kind of theatre, where individuals engage in

carefully constructed self-presentations tailored to the various *'front regions'* where they interact with others. So, in an ideal *'moral neighbourhood'*, however, individuals hold each other accountable for their moral identities and reflect thoughtfully on their behaviour, choices, and interactions. Erving Goffman (1959), for example, captures this idea of *'social feedback'* with the concept of *'civil inattention'*, a subtle form of communication in which we acknowledge another's presence without engaging them directly. For example, runners passing each other on a trail might exchange a quick nod or a brief "Hi." Ignoring fellow runners entirely would seem rude, yet striking up a conversation would feel overly intrusive. This deliberate modulation of interaction can also serve as a gentle form of social correction. On a train, for example, if someone is playing music too loudly, a polite glance or a subtle clearing of the throat can often be enough to encourage them to turn it down – without the need for a direct confrontation. These small, intentional gestures help uphold norms of respect and consideration in shared spaces.

By adhering to social norms, people engage with their *'morally better selves'*, striving to align their actions with shared ethical principles. Within such a community, *'shame'* plays a constructive role. When someone discreetly points out a moral shortcoming, it is taken as an opportunity for self-improvement rather than met with indignation. For this reason, it is essential that individuals remain open to being held accountable for their moral character. The vital role of shame in upholding morality was assessed by Adam Smith (2009). Already in the 18th century he warned that a society without shame risks moral decay, as people would no longer care about how their actions are perceived by others or about the image they project. According to Smith, morality is fundamentally shaped by viewing oneself through the lens of the *'impartial spectator'* – an internalized, fair, and objective observer that helps us evaluate our actions. Do your actions align with the approval of this impartial spectator? Would you accept the same behaviour in others if you were an observer? Reflecting on such questions enables individuals to grow morally, taking into account both the immediate well-being of others and the broader needs of society. Ultimately, Smith urged us to adopt the perspective of a *'universal impartial spectator'* as a moral compass guiding our actions. This precludes racism, sexism and other forms of key injustices.

Conclusion: The collective challenge of individual moral growth

In this paper, I have explored the modern emphasis on authenticity, which often prioritizes self-expression and individualism. I have argued that these tendencies, while seemingly liberating, can contribute to hyper-individualism and ultimately weaken social cohesion. This makes it all the more urgent to re-connect authenticity with a sense of the collective. Rather than focusing solely on the idea of 'being oneself', I propose that we should strive towards becoming the best possible version of ourselves. Achieving this moral ideal, however, demands a collective effort to create an environment where the pursuit of

moral growth is both visible and encouraged. Outward behaviour is essential in this endeavour. I have shown that following social norms and conventions is not merely a matter of superficial politeness but a fundamental part of fostering respect, empathy, and social trust. Simple gestures – such as holding a door open or refraining from interrupting – acknowledge the dignity of others and help build a sense of mutual respect, even when they are not accompanied by deep personal sentiment. At this point, good examples that set the tone and moral education become crucial. According to Aristotle (2009), this receptivity to moral growth is not innate but cultivated through education and habituation. He suggests that the repeated practice of norm-driven behaviour, starting in childhood, eventually integrates good manners and moral virtues into one's character (Jacobs 2020). Because the human brain instinctively seeks patterns to embed behaviour (Kahneman 2011), repeated actions – whether learning to drive or practising civility – become ingrained over time. Regularly adhering to social norms gradually integrates these norms into one's character. The foundational role of moral education in teaching young people moral behaviour has also been emphasised by Kant (2007). Education, in his view, is not about learning morality but about enabling individuals to act in accordance with what they already rationally recognize as morally required. Schools, thus, should not simply train obedience but help students develop the capacity to act from duty rather than fear of punishment or pursuit of self-interest. However, this is no simple task, as humans are prone to what Kant (1998) calls '*radical evil*' – the tendency to subordinate morality to all sorts of inclinations and different types of concerns, like those stemming from self-love and self-conceit, and later rationalize this choice. Kant (1996b) is particularly wary of vices that threaten moral progress by leading individuals to subordinate duty to self-interest or subjective preference. Kant (2006: 103) emphasized the need for self-discipline over self-indulgence, warning against rationalizing immoral behaviour by appealing to human vulnerability. "*The true courage of virtue (...) does not so much consists in taking on the troubles and sacrifices which must be encountered, but rather in facing and conquering the deception of the far more dangerous, untruthful, and treacherous principle of evil within us that seeks to rationalize and justify all violations of right by appealing to the weakness of human nature.*" By holding ourselves accountable, we naturally reflect on how our actions affect others. Civilization, at its core, relies on individuals exercising moral self-discipline, guided by shared norms that sustain a cohesive society. As Norbert Elias (2000) observed, civilization is not simply about conforming to expectations due to external enforcement but stems from internalizing those expectations. In this paper, I have aimed to explain how such internalization can be achieved, why it is essential, and particularly why it holds significant importance in what has been termed the "*age of authenticity*" (Taylor 2007: 473).

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Fransoa Levro

Povezivanje individua u vreme autentičnosti. O važnosti društvenih normi i moralne dramaturgije

Apstrakt

Promišljanjem autentičnosti i reafirmacijom značaja društvenih normi, ovaj rad se bavi problemima koji nastaju usled fragmentacije u pozno-modernim društvima i predlaže neka rešenja za suživot. Dok je, s jedne strane, autentičnost – koja se slavi kao izraz individualne slobode – uistinu omogućila značajan društveni napredak i emancipaciju, u hiper-individualističkoj verziji, ona sve više skrajnuje društvenost i zajedničke vrednosti. Povezujući filozofsku raspravu o autentičnosti sa sociološkim teorijama društvenih normi, ovaj rad istražuje koncept moralne dramaturgije (eng. *moral stagecraft*), model kroz koji hotimično igranje uloga i pridržavanje deljenim normama pospešuje moralni razvoj i sanaciju uzajamnog poverenja. Redefinišući autentičnost kao težnju za ličnim moralnim napretkom, koje je pak za osnovu ima zajedničke norme i vrednosti, kao i povezano sa idealom 'pozitivne slobode', ovaj naučni

rad doprinosi savremenim raspravama o etici, individualnosti i kolektivnoj odgovornosti. Kroz praktične primere, ilustruje se kako ova rekonceptualizacija autentičnosti potencijalno miri ličnu slobodu i društvenu koheziju u doba hiper-individualizma.

Ključne reči: autentičnost, društvenost, moralna dramaturgija, norme i vrednosti, pozitivna sloboda, društvene norme
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