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## My Authentic Self: Rousseau and the Ethics of Authenticity in the Age of Gender Ideology

Steven Kessler

University of Rochester, [stevenkessleremail@gmail.com](mailto:stevenkessleremail@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

This article examines the origins of the contemporary iteration of gender ideology pervasive in the western world today. To accomplish this, the article is broken into three main components. The first component examines the source of where the current trend in picking pronouns, genders, and sexual orientations emanates from. This is attributed to an ideology called, "the ethics of authenticity." The tenets of the ethics of authenticity are delineated in the article. Another component of the article attributes the origin of authenticity to the work and thought of Jean Rousseau. Specifically, four of his works are examined as fundamentally important to this ideology. The four works examined are *The discourse on the arts and sciences*, *The discourse on the origin of inequality*, *Emile, or on education*, and *Confessions*. These four works explain what authenticity is, and the process of how we lost it. Finally, an explanation of how contemporary gender ideological adherents are best viewed using the lens of Rousseau and authenticity to understand the rationale behind the ideological movement occurs.

### Keywords

authenticity, Rousseau, gender ideology

**Abstract**

This article examines the origins of the contemporary iteration of gender ideology pervasive in the western world today. To accomplish this, the article is broken into three main components. The first component examines the source of where picking pronouns and genders emanates from. This is attributed to an ideology called, “the ethics of authenticity.” The tenets of the ethics of authenticity are delineated in the article. Another component of the article attributes the origin of authenticity to the work and thought of Jean Rousseau. Specifically, four of his works are examined as fundamentally important to this ideology. The four works examined are *The discourse on the arts and sciences*, *The discourse on the origin of inequality*, *Emile, or on education*, and *Confessions*. These four works explain what authenticity is, and the process of how we lost it. Finally, an explanation of how contemporary gender ideological adherents are best viewed using the lens of Rousseau and authenticity to understand the rationale behind the ideological movement occurs.

## **My Authentic Self: Rousseau & The Ethics of Authenticity In The Age of Gender Ideology**

### **Introduction**

In the current climate in western civilization, gender ideology is on the tip of everyone's tongue. Whether it is pronouns, transgenderism, choosing restrooms, or participating in sporting events, gender ideological issues are ubiquitous. To understand how we arrived at our current state with gender ideology, we must understand how these ideas germinated, and where they originate from. That origin point is the work and thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and specifically, something called, "the ethics of authenticity," or authenticity for short.

For an example of authenticity as it relates to gender ideology, read the words of pop-music singer, Demi Lovato, who recently came-out to the world and revealed she identifies as gender non-binary, and will now use the pronoun "they" instead of "she." Lovato publicized that, "I feel that this best represents the fluidity I feel in my gender expression and allows me to feel most authentic and true to the person I both know I am, and am still discovering" (Lovato, as quoted by Lewis, 2021). Note Lovato's use of the word, "authentic." Lovato desires to live authentically, and true to herself.

Lovato is not the only celebrity voicing a sentiment and desire to live authentically when it comes to gender expression. Actress Tessa Thompson articulated her position on her gender identity in the following terms: "it's so free and you can be anything that you want to be" (Renfro & Ahlgrim, 2021). British singer, Sam Smith, felt that, "After a lifetime of being at war with my gender, I've decided to embrace myself for who I am, inside and out . . . I hope you can see me like I see myself now" (Ahlgrim, 2021).

Gender ideology is not confined only to personal expression. A commercial for the company, Logitech, instructs their viewing audience that, “To create the future, we must defy the logic of the past” (Logitech, 2021). Ellen DeGeneres, one of the most prominent voices in the LGBT movement today, created a cartoon show for children called, “Little Ellen.” The trailer for the show enthusiastically proclaimed that, “Little Ellen and their friends march to the beat of their own drum . . . the best way to have fun is to be yourself, no matter what” (Little Ellen, 2021).

Each person or organization quoted represents quintessential aspects of gender ideology in the zeitgeist today. Specifically, embedded in each of these quotations are the assumptions, ideas, concepts, and premises of the ethics of authenticity. To understand how and why authenticity is embedded in the quotations above, we must first define authenticity. Once an understanding of authenticity occurs, an examination of its source and origin takes place, which is a review of some of the work and thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the man responsible for the ideology of authenticity. Finally, a concluding section occurs where the quotations above (as well as additional examples) are dovetailed with authenticity’s definition and Rousseau’s contributions to the movement occurs. This will illustrate why authenticity is the best lens to view and understand the manner that contemporary adherents to gender ideology are employing in their gender identities.

### **Authenticity**

As stated previously, Lovato’s use of the word authentic in this context is an allusion to the ideological concept known as, “the ethics of authenticity” (Taylor, 1991). Lionel Trilling described authenticity as, “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (1971, p. 2). It is the, “avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one’s own self” (Trilling, 1971,

p. 5). Andrew Potter commented on Trilling's work, explaining that authenticity is, "The distinction between how something *seems* and what it actually *is*- the distinction . . . between appearance and reality" (2010, p. 9). Authenticity is the, "distinction between an inner true self and . . . outer false self" (Potter, 2010, p. 19).

Essentially, what we feel and sense on the inside is often in conflict with what we present on the outside. What we feel and sense on the inside is our inner voice, and, "the inner voice was important because it tells us what the right thing to do is. Being in touch with our moral feelings matter here, as a means to the end of acting rightly" (Taylor, 1994, p. 28). Authenticity, "accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, my own inner nature, which it sees in danger of being lost" (Taylor, 1994, p. 30). Authenticity is therefore concerned with, "the real self buried in there, the self the one has to dig out and express" (Appiah, as quoted by Taylor, 1994, p. 155). To dig it out, we must discover the, "source . . . deep in us" (Taylor, 1991, p. 26).

We must "discover" the source within us because it is buried and hidden. Our true selves are buried within because our authentic nature is, "subject to the constant influence, the literal *in-flowing*, of the mental processes of others, which in the degree that they stimulate or enlarge his consciousness, make it less his own" (Trilling, 1971, p. 61). The more outside voices and opinions we are subjected to, the more, "difficult it is to know what his own self is and what being true to it consist in" (Trilling, 1971, p. 61). When we cannot hear our inner voice because the opinions and ideas of others are drowning it out, we become, "attuned to catch the signals sent out by the consensus of his fellows and the institutional agencies of the culture, to the extent that he is scarcely a self at all, but rather a reiterated impersonation" (Trilling, 1971, p. 66).

External influences mute our inner voice. When the inner voice is no longer audible, we can only hear outside influences, and we end up copying others and conforming to what society

says is appropriate. To live authentically, one should not, “mold my life to the demands of external conformity; I can’t even find the model by which to live outside myself. I can only find it within” (Taylor, 1994, p. 30). Authenticity necessitates an inward reflection because we cannot find our authentic voice anywhere else but within.

To be truly authentic, we must look within ourselves and accept that, “there is a certain way of being human that is *my way*. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s” (Taylor, 1991, pp. 27-28). Authenticity therefore, “demands that I break hold of all such external impositions and decide for myself alone” (Taylor, 1991, p. 27). By looking inward and making contact with our own inner voice, we can be authentic and true to ourselves, and, “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover” (Taylor, 1991, p. 29).

Taylor’s interpretation regarding originality and authenticity was both shared and furthered by others. Potter explained that authenticity is more than simply discovered within, but that it is contrived: your authenticity, “is not so much discovered, as it is invented, which makes the distinction between fiction and non-fiction irrelevant” (Potter, 2010, p. 138). It is not important that authenticity is rooted in facts or standards, but rather that it comes from within, and is devoid of external forces influencing the individual’s inner voice. Gene Starobinsky elaborated in similar fashion to Potter, albeit at an earlier date. He wrote that authenticity is, “speech that does not limit itself to mimicking something that already exists. It is free to deform and to invent, so long as it remains obedient to its own inner law” (Starobinsky, 1971, p. 198). Authenticity, “prohibits nothing” (Starobinsky, 1971, p. 198), which means however contrived, deformed, or downright preposterous something may seem, so long as one looks inward and rejects external forms of conformity and convention, it is legitimate.

An individual's authenticity can only be invented from within by the individual; it does not exist anywhere else. There is no set boundary to it either. This is where another element to authenticity, the uniqueness of authenticity, enters the conversation. In being uniquely authentic, the individual is, "rebellious against commonly accepted norms. He<sup>1</sup> is claiming the right to live in an abnormal fashion because inner conviction tells him that he must" (Starobinsky, 1971, p. 204). We must be unique to be authentic because any form of similarity means convention and external influences. This is why much authentic speech and action is not only original and different, but entirely invented: "More than that, he<sup>2</sup> is claiming to be the inventor of a new norm that makes other men seem blinded by error" (Starobinsky, 1971, p. 204).

In inventing and discovering our authentic nature, our true self's uniqueness must be taken into consideration towards achieving an authentic end. The authentic person's:

true self is not primarily what I have in common with others . . . but rather what is particular and unique to me. For in nature, only the individual or particular is real; everything universal is a human creation, indeed, a falsification, a distorting imposition on reality. (Melzer, 1997, in eds. Orwin & Tarcov, p. 290)

Conformity and similarities with others are the antithesis of living authentically. Any form of commonality among neighbors is a corrupting external influence from society: "Thus, everything in myself that I have in common probably derives from the alien influence of society. Everything

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<sup>1</sup> The "He" referred to here is the individual attempting to live authentically.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



in me that is particular, unique, and idiosyncratic is likely to derive from my true inner self” (Melzer, 1997, in eds. Orwin & Tarcov, p. 290).<sup>3</sup>

At this point, a clear picture of authenticity has emerged. The authentic individual is unique, inventive, and permits any mode of life, however contrived, so long as our inner voice is followed. The inner voice must drown out the external stimuli of society, norms, and other people. If this voice is inaudible, we cannot access it, which means we cannot access our authenticity. The inner voice is the only appropriate authority on how we should live our lives, and what is best. What is good, beautiful, and true cannot be determined anywhere but from within the individual.

The ethics of authenticity, as described above, logically lends itself to several questions. Why is listening to any form of convention so bad? Why is society’s influence problematic? Where does the concept of authenticity originate? Someone had to be the first person, or group of people, to voice these ideas. Unearthing the source of authenticity will illuminate the issues and the questions emanating from authenticity’s tenets.

To answer all of these questions, we have to look at the work and thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. To understand Rousseau’s contribution to the ethics of authenticity, we must examine four of his works: *The discourse on the arts and sciences*, a.k.a., “the first discourse,” *The discourse on the origin of inequality*, a.k.a., “the second discourse,” *Emile, or on education*, and *Confessions*.<sup>4</sup> By inspecting these works, we can fully comprehend the totality of

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<sup>3</sup> Herein lies the paradox of authenticity. People are instructed to be unique, which means they are following orders, and therefore are not being authentic. In being authentic and inventive, a person may end up sharing a commonality with someone else. Further, with the barrage of media and our interconnected nature in the modern world, a person may be influenced- albeit unconsciously- by inescapable external influences. These issues are what makes true authenticity so elusive, and therefore likely impossible to achieve.

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, we could add, *Julie or the new Heloise*, to the list, but it would be a bit redundant while also leading us slightly out of scope of this particular discussion. To oversimplify, *Julie* is basically the ethics of authenticity in

authenticity. After delving into Rousseau's contribution to authenticity, a concluding section that dovetails the ethics of authenticity, Rousseau's influence, and the current climate of gender ideology together follows.

### **Rousseau and Authenticity**

In the first discourse, Rousseau asked, "How sweet it would be to live among us, if the exterior appearance was always an image of the heart's tendencies" (1750, p. 4). Rousseau is highlighting his belief that human beings are inauthentic. Our outward appearances are different than our inward sentiments. This was not always the case.

Rousseau spoke of a time, "Before art fashioned our manners and taught our passions to speak an affected language" (1750, p. 5). During this bygone era, "men found their security in the ease with which they could see through each other" (Rousseau, 1750, p. 5). With the passing of time, our authenticity has unfortunately given way to an era of inauthenticity. Now, instead of being authentic and showing the world who we are, human beings present an outward appearance where, "misleading uniformity governs our customs, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mould: incessantly politeness makes demands, propriety issues orders, and incessantly people follow customary usage, never their own incarnations" (Rousseau, 1750, p. 5).

Rousseau laments the superficiality and inauthenticity people exhibit publically. People are not looking inward to their inner voice, but instead are looking outward and following custom, convention, and other external influences. Due to this occurrence:

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the form of a romance novel. However, much of the work is about gender, love, and authority, which is why it is slightly out of scope.

One does not dare to appear as what one is. And in this perpetual constraint, men who make up this herd we call society, placed in the same circumstances, will all do the same things, unless more powerful motives prevent them. Thus, one will never know well the person one is dealing with. (Rousseau, 1750, p. 5)

Thus, according to Rousseau, human beings are inauthentic, conformist, and wear masks of superficiality in society. We never know what the person we are interacting with is really like. We only know a copy of what society will allow.

Rousseau concluded the first discourse by rhetorically asking, “What good is it looking for our happiness in the opinion of others if we can find it in ourselves?” (Rousseau, 1750, p. 23). He furthered his rhetorical inquiry with the following words: “Is it not enough to go back into oneself and listen to the voice of one’s conscience . . .?” (1750, p. 24). His final thoughts of the first discourse distinguished between those who, “knew how to speak well; the other how to act well” (Rousseau, 1750. P. 24).

Having delineated the tenets of authenticity, what Rousseau’s implying with his rhetoric should now be obvious. What is not clear from this is Rousseau’s use of an implicit assumption from the beginning of the first discourse. To reiterate, Rousseau wrote that, “Before art fashioned our manners and taught our passions to speak an affected language” (Rousseau, 1750, p. 5). When and where was this period? How did men find, “the ease with which they could see through each other” (Rousseau, 1750, p. 5)? The implication is that this period enabled authenticity. How did this time period allow authenticity to flourish?

The answer is alluded to in a portion of a Rousseau quotation from above where he referenced, “this herd we call society.” Is society somehow the problem? If so, what makes

society so problematic? Did society cause us to lose our authenticity? The answer to that question is written in Rousseau's, *The discourse on the origin of inequality*.

In the second discourse, Rousseau delineated with nuance and sophistication how civil-society as we know and understand it today came to exist. In *Emile*, *Confessions*, and at other times in Rousseau's career, he proclaimed that, "there is no original perversity in the human heart." The word "original" is a biblical allusion to the Christian concept of original sin. This was Rousseau's formal invalidation of the concept. Not only did Rousseau invalidate original sin, but he went a step further: he invalidated the entire creation myth from the Book of Genesis. He then supplanted that creation myth with his own creation myth of humankind, which is the essence of the second discourse.

In the second discourse, Rousseau retold humanity's origin to his audience. We did not initially live in the Garden of Eden, per the Biblical creation myth, but instead lived in Rousseau's version of utopia, "the state of nature." The state of nature was a pre-civil-society existence. Among other things, when we lived in the state of nature, we lived alone; we did not live with families, tribes, in villages, towns, or cities. It was not definite that we would encounter another human being ever in our lives while in the state of nature.<sup>5</sup>

Not only were we atomized and isolated, but we lived completely independently. We depended on no one, and no one depended on us. Rousseau did not distinguish between types of dependency, like positive dependency or negative dependency, nor did he differentiate between

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<sup>5</sup> A logical question to ask is how did children and families live in the state of nature? Rousseau articulated that in the state of nature, men and women would randomly encounter one another, and then reproduce. They would leave each other's company once the sexual act concluded. Children, once they were old enough to fend for themselves, would then run off on their own, likely never encountering each other again. Rousseau's image of family life in the state of nature is more akin to the way a dog breeder breeds puppies than the experience most human beings know and remember.

degrees and intensity of dependency. According to Rousseau, not a single iota of dependency was present.

Additionally, labor- the punishment for original sin that Rousseau invalidated- was not a mandatory aspect of the human condition. Neither was the concept of private property. It was not until someone used labor to overcome the condition of things in the state of nature did private property emerge. With the emergence of labor and private property came the birth of civil-society as we know and understand it today. Now, labor and private property are inescapable aspects of the human condition. With labor and private property came dependence on others.

This newfound dependency emerged due the changes in life that accompanied the transition from the state of nature to civil-society. One of these changes was the division of labor. Some of us are skilled with our hands, in the fields, or in construction, while others are not. Those unskilled in building houses or farming now need the help of those more skilled in these areas. Those of us less skilled are now dependent on those more skilled, and those more skilled are now depended on by those less skilled. With this dependence came an unfortunate aspect of social life present in society that was absent in the state of nature. A person must now:

seek incessantly to interest them in his fate and to make them find their own profit, in fact or in appearance, in working for his. This makes him two-faced and crooked with some, imperious and harsh with others, and puts him in the position of having to abuse everyone he needs when he cannot make them fear him and does not find it in his interests to be of useful service to them. (Rousseau, 1755, p. 54)

In other words, we must be inauthentic and wear a mask of inauthenticity to get our neighbors to help us in our areas of deficiency.

In society, we are now dependent and inauthentic. In addition, Rousseau understood the emergence of labor, private property, and the division of labor that commenced, as having negative economic consequences. The new division of labor caused the creation of economic conditions like scarcity and surplus that were not present in the state of nature. Rousseau interpreted these new components of economics in a zero-sum capacity. The wealth of one came at the expense of another. Professor Alessandro Ferrara's comments on Rousseau's interpretation of this phenomenon succinctly explain the issue: "These rewards are zero-sum objects. In order for the acquisition of wealth to constitute a meaningful goal for me, there must exist others who are *not* rich" (Ferrara, 2016, p. 3).

We must successfully engage those we share dependency relationships with by using flattery and cunning, or else we will miss out on material goods in this freshly created competition with our neighbors. Flattery and cunning were necessary now because

the outcome of any competition depends . . . on what others *believe* of us. . . . by rewarding conformity with existent roles and successful participation in the division of labor with such practices as zero-sum goods . . . modern civil society. . . put a premium on cunning, on the ability to mislead. (Ferrara, 2016, p. 3)

If we are not viewed favorably, or develop a bad reputation, we will not be able to get the help of those we are depending on. We are essentially forced to wear the mask of inauthenticity, and conform to pre-approved social roles. Our reputations and how others view us became an inescapable necessity in society that was absent in the state of nature.

These newly introduced conditions of society inextricably linked authenticity and dependence: "the dependency relationships formed in society, and the process of psychological

corruption they produce, culminate in the other-directed self-seeker, who spends his life obsessed with others precisely because he cares only about himself.” (Melzer, 1996). Now, the only reason we are kind is to gain a utilitarian advantage from others, others we do not actually care about. We now commit blatantly inauthentic acts where one person uses another as a tool to improve his life. All of this stems from dependency relationships present in society that were not present in the state of nature.

Dependency and the zero-sum conception of economics made people especially concerned with the opinions of others, precipitating our inauthenticity. Now, “The fear of losing ground in social competition makes it convenient for people to choose the solid ground of established, stereotyped forms of self-representation rather than undergoing a toilsome research for their true motives and identity” (Ferrara, 2016, p. 4). Concerns over missing out pressured an individual to pick the low hanging fruit and play it safe in social matters. This social pressure to conform in the face of competition made, “people become so dependent on the opinion of others, that . . . the self is gradually reduced to pure exteriority, a mere copy of what society requires” (Ferrara, 2016, p. 4).

We are now shaped by external opinions and pressures, influenced by things we are not free to choose ourselves. Rousseau retold this causal chain of events to his audience thusly:

the savage lives in himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others . . . from their judgment alone that he draws the sentiment of his own existence. (Rousseau, 1755, p. 70)

Rousseau elaborated on this turn of events here:

And since these qualities were the only ones that could attract consideration, he was soon forced to have them or affect them. It was necessary, for his advantage, to show himself to be something other than what he in fact was. Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things. (Rousseau, 1755, pp. 53-54)

This is the concept he alluded to in the first discourse. We must now be inauthentic, wearing a mask, other-directed, and dependent on the opinions of others instead of looking within and listening to our inner voice.

Rousseau devised a plan to mitigate these harmful effects caused by society's emergence that were not present in the state of nature. Rousseau's method of implementing this plan was educating children towards authenticity. This pedagogical approach is the thrust of his book, *Emile, or on education*. This educational treatise is largely predicated on insulating children from the corrupting influences of opinions and prejudices. In Rousseau's era, prejudice meant the external conventions from society, including inherited customs, traditions, opinions, or beliefs; it did not mean bigotry or hatred in this context.

Rousseau illustrated the goal of an educator who educates towards authenticity: "Keeping the nascent shrub away from the highway and securing it from the impact of human opinions. . . . Someone else can draw its circumference, but you alone must build the fence" (1762A, p. 38). The aim of Rousseau's educator is to, "apply yourself to keeping him always within himself" (Rousseau, 1762A, p. 118). The educator must prevent the pupil from encountering prejudices: "prejudices come in crowds; it is from them that he must be preserved" (Rousseau, 1762A, p. 118). In preventing the child from the influence of opinions and conventions of society, he will be able to look inward and follow his authentic inner voice. This educational plan will create an individual that:



Does not know what routine, custom, or habit is. What he did yesterday does not influence what he does today. He never follows a formula, does not give way before authority or example, and acts and speaks only as it suits him. So do not expect from him dedicated speeches or studied manners, but always the faithful expression of his ideas and the conduct born of his inclinations. (Rousseau, 1762A, p. 160)

The educator is persuaded by, “the conviction that the best education consists not in shaping the human mind in accordance with preordained models but in shielding the human being from the prevailing cultural models” (Ferrara, 2016, p. 2). The pupil educated in this manner will eventually adopt a mentality that believes: “I do not need to choose ready-made comfortable roads; I pass wherever a man can pass. I see all that a man can see; and depending only on myself, I enjoy all the liberty a man can enjoy” (Rousseau, 1762A, p. 412).

If the child is not appropriately shielded from the forces of society that alienate us from our authentic inner voice, this person will fall victim to inauthenticity. This is because society depraves and perverts men; let him find in their prejudices the source of all their vices let him inclined to esteem each individual but despise the multitude; let him see that all men wear pretty much the same mask, but let him also know that there are faces more beautiful than the mask covering them. (Rousseau, 1762A, p. 237)

Immersion in society forces us to wear a mask and conceal our authentic identity. When immersed in society with our masks, alienated from our true authentic selves, we grow acclimated to our mask and conditioned to the stimuli. Rousseau painted a picture of the person weaned on society’s milk:

The man of the world is whole in his mask. Almost never being in himself, he is always alien and ill at ease when forced to go back there. What he is, is nothing. What he appears to be is everything for him. (Rousseau, 1762A, p. 230)

This type of person is the unfortunate result, according to Rousseau, when we are raised without insulation from the harmful effects of society.

In the second discourse, Rousseau diagnosed the problem and explained the processes that caused our loss of authenticity via our transition from the state of nature to civil-society. One of Rousseau's goals in writing *Emile* was creating a pedagogical model that shields us from the unfortunate fallout of society, which if correctly followed, will enable authenticity. If Rousseau was so aware of the problems and even had potential solutions, what kept him from living according to his principles? Why was he not better able to spread the word, fix our problems, and create the world he wished to live in? The answer is simple: shame.

As Professor Jill Lock wrote in, *Democracy and the death of shame: political equality and social disturbance* (2016), authenticity's diametric opposition is shame (p. 74). Shame, "obstructs an authentic life that is lived on one's own terms. It constrains one's ability to live as who one genuinely is or wants to be, free from the scripts and stereotypes of . . . society" (Lock, 2016, p. 33). Essentially, shame stifles our authenticity by dictating that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to behave. Shame provides a blueprint with instructions that one must abide by, mandating how one should act. When a person fails to adhere to societal prejudices, shame is used as a powerful tool to embarrass a person into appropriate behavior.

Shame acts as an agent of socialization. Through a fear of shame, it, "minimized the work of figuring out how to behave in the world, instructing people as to which words and actions are

appropriate to reveal and which to conceal in particular times and spaces” (Lock, 2016, p. 21). Shame works hand-in-hand with prejudices, punishing those who fail to conform in accordance with preordained societal norms. Because of this, the authentic person is not capable of living freely. The authentic person’s authenticity is concealed according to someone else’s norms. This is why the authentic person has such an aversion to shame. When a person is openly hostile to the concept of shame, it is because, “they are beholden to an ideology that is suspicious of any tradition or custom that requires them to conceal or moderate who they believe they ‘truly are’” (Lock, 2016, p. 21).

Shame prohibits one from living authentically, and if something prohibits authenticity, then it is anathema to Rousseau and his ethos. This is why there is a, “theme of the person who is perennially misunderstood and expected to live by a life script so different from the one dictated by the heart” (Lock, 2016, p. 75) throughout Rousseau’s canon. Specifically, the desire to live life on his terms, free from shame and the opinions of others, is a major theme of his autobiography, *Confessions* (1762B).

Lionel Trilling explained the concept of what an autobiography is in, *Sincerity and authenticity*:

The subject of an autobiography is just such a self, bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent, that is to say, on demonstrating his sincerity. His conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with this impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted. (1971, p. 25)

This was Rousseau's goal with *Confessions*. Rousseau put himself out there for the whole world to see, warts and all. For Rousseau, "The process of confession . . . was a process of unmasking. . . of bringing his authentic self into being" (Berman, 1970, p. 86).

By removing his societal-induced mask, thereby bringing his authentic self to the forefront, Rousseau attempted to overcome shame. He needed to overcome shame because it truly dominated his life: he had an, "unconquerable sense of shame, by which I have always been ruled" (1762B, p. 452). He wrote that, "I was afraid of being put to shame; I feared shame more than death" (1762B, p. 81). He admitted that he, "was always susceptible to shame" (1762B, p. 14). Shame therefore prevented Rousseau from living in accordance with his principles:

I could envisage nothing grander or finer than to be free and virtuous, above the reach of fortune and the good or bad opinion of men. Dependent on upon myself alone. Although a sense of false shame and a fear of ridicule at first prevent me from living in accordance with these principles. (1762B, pp. 346-47)

Rousseau understood that as long as shame was present in his life, he could never live as he desired. This is because, "Man cannot be himself- live in a way that is true and natural . . . if he lives in fear of being mocked and humiliated" (Lock, 2016, p. 91).

By confessing his sins publicly, he is exculpating himself to his critics and ridiculers, while simultaneously taking ownership of his shame. Essentially, he is his own public relations firm attempting to get in front of a scandal and dictate the narrative rather than let others get to the story first and spin the narrative against him. In doing so, Rousseau can, "make confessions for which I would never have to blush in front of anyone" (1762B, p. 505).

*Confessions* was the first book of its kind ever written. Publically making confessions and “airing your dirty laundry” like this had never been done before. In writing *Confessions*, “He authorized and inaugurates a confessional mode of politics rooted in an earnest account of authenticity against the tyranny of shame” (Lock, 2016, p. 93). Rousseau’s campaign against shame in favor of authenticity created an entirely new ethic, one we are seeing today on full display.

The modern person living authentically in the vein of Rousseau is one who is free of shame, and able to look within and act on whatever it is they find. To live authentically, one must

let go and stop trying. . . . I truly find myself when, rejecting all strenuous talk about my higher self, and liberated from shame and guilt, I just freely observe and sincerely acknowledge all that goes on within my soul. (Melzer, 1996)

Make zero effort to hide your actions and inclinations, no matter how shameful. In fact, the authentic life is one that encourages you to, “admit and reveal our true inner feelings, and this means especially the feelings we would otherwise want to hide, that is, the base and shameful ones” (Melzer, 1996). Not only that, but the more shameful your confessions are, the better. The truly authentic person we must revere and lionize is the one who is most unashamed, no matter how shocking the confession. The, “more horrible their secrets, the nobler they are for revealing them. Thus, on a certain level, the worse they are, the better they are: heroes of sincerity are to be found only among the most unfortunate or depraved” (Melzer, in Orwin & Tarcovs, 1997, p. 277).

The authentic person must be fearful not of shame, but instead must be fearful of concealing their inner voice. Rousseau went so far as to admit his biggest fear in writing *Confessions* is not revealing the shameful aspects of his life, but keeping them from the public: “There is only one thing that I need fear in this whole undertaking, which is, not that I might say too much or tell lies, but that I might not say everything and so conceal some truths” (1762B, p. 171). No matter how salacious, Rousseau was adamant that, “The particular object of my confessions is to make known my inner self, exactly as it was in every circumstance of my life” (1762B, p. 270).

## **Conclusion**

Rousseau’s concept of authenticity is the best lens to view the contemporary emergence of gender ideology prevalent today. Through this lens, the philosophical assumptions and implicit ideological concepts employed by those in popular culture are illuminated and recognizable.

Tessa Thompson’s view that gender is, “so free and you can be anything that you want to be” (Renfro & Ahlgrim, 2021), relies on the inventive and personal nature of authenticity. Logitech’s advertising campaign stated that, “To create the future, we must defy the logic of the past” (Logitech, 2021). Logitech makes a conscientious critique and rejection of norms and prejudices. Sam Smith explained that, “After a lifetime of being at war with my gender I’ve decided to embrace myself for who I am, inside and out . . . I hope you can see me like I see myself now” (Ahlgrim, 2021). His authenticity in gender relies on his inner voice appearing in conflict with his outer appearance; he desires to have others accept the apparent contradiction between the two. The Little Ellen show relies on rejecting prejudices and following an inner

voice as well: “Little Ellen and their friends march to the beat of their own drum. . . The best way to have fun is to be yourself, no matter what” (Little Ellen, 2021).

To return to Lovato’s quote from the beginning of the article, we can see almost all the tenets of authenticity: “I feel that this best represents the fluidity I feel in my gender expression and allows me to feel most authentic and true to the person I both know I am, and am still discovering” (Lovato, as quoted by Lewis, 2021). Lovato wants to be true to herself, regardless of what that may be. She wants to be authentic, and the fact that authenticity is discovered is concurrently present in her quote as well. Lovato also had a public coming-out, and confessed her beliefs, throwing shame and caution to the wind: “Sharing this with you now opens another level of vulnerability for me. I’m doing this for those out there that haven’t been able to share who they truly are with their loved ones” (Lovato, as quoted by Lewis, 2021). Lovato references those who cannot come-out and share their authentic gender identity with their loved ones. In all likelihood, they cannot do so because of the oppression of shame.

To articulate the quintessential nature of Lovato’s life lived authentically, pay attention to the nuances of her publicly expressed inner voice:

I feel like the reason why that happened was because I was ignoring my truth, and I was suppressing who I really am in order to please stylists, or team members, or this or that, or even fans that wanted me to be the sexy, feminine pop star in the leotard and look a certain way, you know? I thought that was what I was supposed to be, and now I just realize that it’s so much more important to live your truth than to ever suppress yourself because that’s the type of stuff that happens when you do. (Lovato, as quoted by Lewis, 2021)

Remember, the truly authentic inner voice is not what society or others want us to be, but it is a conscientious rejection of those norms and prejudices. Our true self is unique and exclusively our own. Anything we have in common with others, or worse, the prejudices others impose on us, is a corrupting influence. The only thing missing from Lovato's coming-out is explicitly declaring her uniqueness. In *Confessions*, Rousseau actually opened the book by proclaiming his uniqueness: "I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist" (1762B, p. 5).

Uniqueness combined with the discovery and inventive elements of authenticity is what gives authenticity the potential for the peculiar and even the downright bizarre. To reiterate Starobinsky's thoughts on the issue, authenticity is, "speech that does not limit itself to mimicking something that already exists. It is free to deform and to invent, so long as it remains obedient to its own inner law" (Starobinsky, 1971, p. 198). Nothing is out of bounds in the name of authenticity.

With this in mind, how Facebook came to allow their users to pick their gender identification out of 58 different genders options (Goldman, 2014) now makes sense. For an additional look at the thought process as to how many people arrive at their newly invented gender identification, follow a Twitter account called, "Libs of Tik Tok," (@libsoftiktok).

For the record, this Twitter account is a pejorative and mean-spirited account aimed at mocking liberal-leaning Tik Tok social media users. The point here is not to insult and condescend these people, but rather to illustrate just how inventive contemporary gender ideological adherents are. For example, a user posted a video explaining that she, a person assigned female sex at birth who identifies as female, is a lesbian, who is in a relationship with a person assigned male sex at birth, yet identifies as female on the inside, making it a lesbian



relationship (Libs of Tik TokA, 2021). The point is that under the rules of authenticity, lesbians do not have to be biological women, or considered women in the traditional sense (Libs of Tik TokA, 2021). Another user referred to herself as, “alexigender,” which is a gender fluid person who never knows exactly what gender they are at the moment (Libs of Tik TokB, 2021). A different Tik Tok user explained the difference between gender-fluid and gender-flux. Gender-fluid means the person’s gender vacillates, but flux refers to the fluctuation of the intensity of their gender identity (Libs of Tik TokC, 2021). For a final example from Libs of Tik Tok, another user referred to herself as, “libra gender.” A libra gender person is largely agender,<sup>6</sup> but maintains a slight connection to a specific gender (Libs of Tik TokD, 2021).

To articulate the more extreme nature of authenticity as it relates to gender identity, a 52-year-old man and a father of seven, left his family to go live as a transgendered six-year-old girl (James, 2015). In an equally extreme, but nonetheless unique story, an adult man transitioned genders to a woman, and then transitioned species to become a dragon (Scott, 2018).

Again, the point here is not to mock and insult adherents of gender ideology, but to show the uniqueness, inventiveness, and the lack of boundaries in gender ideology. As long as the person coming-out and revealing to the world their newly discovered gender identity is true to their own inner voice and not conforming to some established norm, it is congruent with the ideology and lauded. All the authentic person needs to do in discovering their newly acquired gender is to look within, act on whatever is it they find, and reject all the external forms of prejudice. External forms of prejudice can deafen our access to our inner voice, which blocks our authenticity.

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<sup>6</sup> The letter “a” in agender is pronounced phonetically as the first letter of the alphabet. It means not having or identifying with a gender.

Rousseau himself attempted to live his life according to these principals. For Rousseau, “a man’s sole duty lies in following in everything the inclinations of his own heart” (Rousseau, 1762B, p. 458). Follow Rousseau’s rule, and authenticity is within your grasp. Live your life in accordance with Rousseau’s motto, which was, “my inviolable maxim with my friends has always been to present myself to their eyes exactly as I am, neither better nor worse” (1762B, p. 544). Speak your truth, discover your inner voice, and ignore the opinions and prejudices of others. If you stay true to yourself, you too can live your authentic life.

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