Narrative Authenticity and Deep Brain Stimulation

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The ideal of authenticity has drawn renewed interest in philosophy, in particular in the field of neuroethics. This paper ties in with the ongoing debate on the influence of Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) on authenticity. [1-7] I argue that two issues have complicated the debate on authenticity. First, there is a disagreement whether authenticity is a matter of self-discovery or of self-creation. While both conceptions capture some truths, they also make problematic claims. Self-discovery based approaches assume a static, innate true self. Self-creation views downplay the limits of self-definition. The second problem is that the concept of authenticity is often not adequately distinguished from autonomy and identity. I propose a narrative approach to authenticity which can tackle both problems. To be authentic is to have a self-narrative 1) that is sustainable in the sense that it is easy to uphold because it is not in tension with one's lived experience, and 2) that excludes vastly different, more coherent and intelligible counternarratives. Narrative authenticity combines elements of self-discovery and self-creation in a sensible manner. A self-narrative leaves room for creativity and self-definition – there are many different ways of construing an authentic self-narrative. On the other hand, in order for a self-narrative to be sustainable, it is necessary to know oneself and to acknowledge the boundaries of who one can be. Furthermore, I argue that narrative authenticity captures the distinguishing elements of authenticity that set this concept apart from narrative identity and autonomy. After defining narrative authenticity, I look at the case of DBS. DBS is a neurotechnology that crucially contributed to the increased debate on authenticity because of its potential to induce abrupt changes in personality, mood and felt authenticity. Understanding authenticity in narrative terms illuminates how DBS can affect the patient's authenticity and suggest strategies for the prevention of adverse effects.

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