

# **THE MODERN SELF AND ITS MORAL CHALLENGES: RULE-FOLLOWING, THE SEARCH FOR HAPPINESS, AND THE NEED FOR AUTHENTICITY**

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From the very beginning of my philosophical journey, I was animated by a concern for three themes that appeared essential in reflecting on the modern condition of the moral subject: the issue of moral rules, the issue of self-fulfillment, and the issue of authenticity. It seemed to me that these themes, though distinct, shared a common root: the tension between the individual and the collectivity, between interiority and the normative structures of the social world. Therefore, I considered them expressions of the same fundamental dynamic: the constitution of the moral subject in modernity.

I began to explore this issue of the modern moral subject more deeply through an interrogation of universal moral rules, which, during my doctoral studies, appeared to me too rigid to reflect the complexity of lived ethical experience. Hence arose my interest in the debate between generalism and particularism, a central controversy in contemporary metaethics.

In my work *Ethics without Principles* (Nica 2013a), I channeled my interest toward the debate between generalism and particularism within the analytical tradition of metaethics. The project started from the question: what does a moral person look like? Is it someone who applies a set of rules or someone who has a contextual moral flair? I sought to understand whether moral life requires anchoring in general rules or whether it can be guided by a discernment sensitive to the concrete nuances of life. I reconstructed the conceptual origins of the disputes between generalism and particularism, starting from the opposition between Plato and Aristotle. While in Plato I identified an orientation toward the Form of the Good as an absolute reference, Aristotle, through the notion of *phronesis*, emphasized the contextual complexity of moral experience. Nevertheless, I avoided anachronistic projections onto ancient philosophers and argued that Greek ethics, far from being a simple morality of rules, was rather an art of living, concerned with integrating virtues into a particular biography (Annas 1981; Irwin 2000).

Analyzing the contemporary debate, I reconstructed generalist positions as characterized by universalizability and prescriptivity (Hare 1963), while particularism emerged as a theory of the holism of moral reasons (Dancy 1993). Particularism denied the possibility of formulating universal principles and maintained that the moral relevance of traits depended on the concrete context. Thus, moral explanation became narrative rather than subsumptive: the justification of a moral decision involved the faithful exposition of the situation's form, not the application of a normative algorithm (Dancy 1993).

In my article “Narrative and Justification in Moral Particularism” (Nica 2013b), I attempted to formulate a coherent theory of narrative justification, one that could rescue particularism from accusations of relativism and irrationalism. I showed that particularist moral justification involves a form of situated rationality rather than formal rationality: the validity of a justification derives not from subsumption under an abstract rule but from the internal coherence of the narrative and its adequacy to the contextual structure.

However, I became aware of the limitations of this perspective: criticisms from Tännsjö Torborn regarding the lack of doxastic justification and from Blackburn concerning the risk of stalling moral progress led me to realize that neither particularism nor generalism offered definitive solutions. Thus,

I proposed a shift in the center of gravity: from the abstract dispute between rules and discernment toward the problem of constituting the moral subject as a life project.

I concluded that moral life could not be reduced either to the mechanical application of rules or to fragmentary contextual flair. Rather, it requires a continuous process of self-constitution, a reflexive self-shaping that integrates values into a coherent and authentic life (Nica 2015b). In this light, the question “what should I do?” was transformed into what seemed to be a deeper question: “who must I become to respond adequately to the moral challenges of life?”

Already in the first stage of my research activity, I had followed the tension between the subject’s need for freedom and the constraint exercised by the impersonal norms of correctness. This direction materialized in *Ethics without Principles* (Nica 2013a), where I discussed the opposition between generalism and particularism by reconstructing their conceptual genealogy within the Western philosophical tradition.

In the next phase, I shifted the focus onto a question with a stronger existential imprint: “Who must I become to respond adequately to the moral challenges of life?” This shift materialized in *The Red Pill. An Essay on Morality and Happiness* (Nica 2015b), a work that, although I tried not to abandon theoretical rigor, proposed a more lively articulation of moral philosophy in relation to the concrete dilemmas of everyday experience. I refused to associate morality with repression and happiness with ignorance, instead proposing a conception in which morality becomes an expression of freedom and happiness, an exercise in lucidity.

Analyzing the question “Why should I be moral?”, I distinguished between the existentialist perspective and the rationalist perspective. The former emphasized the free choice of morality in a universe devoid of guarantees, following the Sartre–Camus line, while the latter argued for the justification of morality through internal coherence and the refusal of logical inconsistency. This double approach allowed me to sketch an image of ethics as an art of lucid living, not as mere submission to external rules. Regarding the care for others, I rejected psychological and normative egoism, emphasizing that openness toward alterity is constitutive of human nature and that the refusal of care implies the denial of fundamental moral equality. Care for others does not stem from self-interest but from the recognition of the reality of the other’s suffering and hope, constituting a higher form of moral lucidity. Discussing the question of why caring for yourself, I highlighted that fulfillment presupposes reconciliation with oneself, the assumption of a personal project, and the commitment to self-transcendence. I argued that self-actualization, as a classical model, becomes insufficient in the absence of a pre-existing essence of the self, proposing instead the model of self-creation: the individual constructs their identity through a reflexive and responsible process (Nica 2015b).

The criticisms leveled at *The Red Pill*, especially by Professor Valentin Mureșan, offered me the opportunity for self-critical reflection on my style and method. I understood the need to temper the essayistic tone and strengthen conceptual rigor, which oriented my next project: *Who Am I? Authenticity and Its Moral Limits* (Nica 2022d).

In this work, I confronted the theme of authenticity, aiming to clarify and rehabilitate it philosophically within a cultural context that had trivialized it. I distinguished between authenticity and sincerity, between authenticity and autonomy, emphasizing that authenticity involves not only the coherence between thought and action or adherence to moral rules but also a deep congruence with a reflexively assumed identity core. I proposed a tripartite typology of authenticity: (1) authenticity as self-discovery – fidelity to an original self (in the Rousseauian line); (2) authenticity as existential commitment – the assumption of a fundamental choice without external guarantees (in a

Kierkegaardian spirit); and (3) authenticity as self-reinvention – an experimentalist model inspired by Nietzsche, where the self is a work of art in perpetual construction (Nica 2022a).

Nietzsche’s reading led me toward this third form of authenticity: not as discovery or conservation, but as the creative expansion of existential possibilities. Reinventing the self involves the lucid integration of identity pluralism into a continuous process of self-transcendence without anchoring in a fixed center. I showed that authenticity cannot be univocally defined; rather, it represents a constellation of converging existential practices, not a singular essence. I preferred a pluralist approach inspired by Wittgenstein’s idea of “family resemblances”, describing authenticity as an open horizon of life possibilities. Thus, my entire reflection sought to reposition moral philosophy beyond impersonal rules or the clichés of personal development, proposing an ethics of personal becoming, where freedom and fidelity to oneself do not exclude but fertilize each other.

After publishing the book and other more theoretical articles on authenticity, I focused on extending my theoretical research into a series of applied directions, through which I tested and refined the conceptual frameworks previously developed. This new stage of work aimed to assess the relevance of my normative distinctions regarding authenticity within the contexts of contemporary applied debates — ranging from bioethical dilemmas to ideological phenomena in recent political discourse. Thus, in the articles “Authenticity and Enhancement: Going Beyond the Self-creation/Self-discovery Dichotomy” (Nica, 2019) and “Enhancement, Authenticity, and Self-creation” (Nica, 2024), I applied the tripartite distinction among the three models of authenticity — *expressivist*, *decisionist*, and *experimentalist* — to nuance the debate about bioenhancement, especially regarding the use of psychopharmacological technologies.

Exploring the application of authenticity in a different direction, in the article co-authored with Ana Hojbotă and Cristina Maria Tofan-Bostan (2023), I investigated the way populist discourses instrumentalize the concept of authenticity. Furthermore, in one of the most recent articles published (Nica & Hojbotă, 2024), I explored the idea of a ‘right to authenticity.’”

What I can now see with greater clarity is that my philosophical reflections and investigations, over the past fifteen years, have gravitated around a fundamental problem: the question concerning the constitution of the modern self, particularly what can be called the “modern moral subject”. This theme of the self was explicitly explored in articles dedicated to the Nietzsche–Foucault line of thought, such as “The Modern Subject in Nietzsche as an 'Unsolvable Puzzle'” (2016a) and “Nietzsche and Foucault on Self-Creation: Two Distinct Projects” (2015a), where I critically analyzed how both thinkers understand the constitution of the self not as the discovery of an inner essence, but as a process of self-creation against the backdrop of a genealogy of modern Western values. I deepened this perspective in a complementary manner in “Affectivity and Anti-modernity. The Problem of Affects in Spinoza and Nietzsche” (2016b) and “The Aesthetics of Existence and the Political in Late Foucault” (2015c), exploring how affects and the relationship to political norms intersect in the constitution of subjectivity.

I continued these investigations in the study “The Work of Art Without an Author. A Foucauldian Perspective on the Idea of Self-Creation in Nietzsche’s Work” (2015b), where I emphasized the difficulties and paradoxes inherent in the notion of self-creation in the absence of a stable evaluative criterion. The theme of the modern self remained relevant in other philosophical explorations as well, such as in the article “Modern Perspectives on Faith: Abraham’s Case in Kant and Kierkegaard. Reconstructions and Critical Remarks” (2017), where I analyzed the tension between moral universalism and the subjectivism of personal faith — a tension essential for understanding the modern self caught between the moral law and the individual voice.

More recently, in “Something New: Fashion, Modernity, Novelty” (2022), I addressed the problem of modern identity from a cultural perspective, examining how fashion, as an expression of the desire for actuality and differentiation, becomes a profound symptom of the constitution of the self in modernity. Thus, unity of my research, beyond the diversity of topics addressed, has been the effort to understand how the modern subject negotiates the relationship between particularity and universality, between social norms and self-assertion, between identity and becoming.

For the future, I have in mind two more ambitious projects. First, a book on dignity, in which I intend to investigate the dual character of the idea of dignity: its meritocratic and egalitarian dimensions. I will analyze how the Aristotelian tradition associated dignity with excellence and individual merit, in contrast with the Judeo-Christian and Kantian perspectives, which uphold an intrinsic and equal dignity for all human beings. I will explore the tensions between these two registers and examine how they affect the constitution of the modern self and the configuration of the contemporary ethical and political space.

In the development of this future book, I will organize the research into four sections: Greek Antiquity, the Judeo-Christian tradition, Kantian and post-Kantian modernity, and contemporary debates on dignity. I will combine historical reconstruction, conceptual analysis, and critical evaluation in order to understand both the evolution of the idea of dignity and its current normative potential.

I will aim to address key questions: whether dignity is a natural property or a historical construction, whether autonomy is a condition of dignity or merely one of its expressions, and to what extent dignity can support an ethics of the recognition of human diversity. I will also examine how to avoid the ideological instrumentalization of the concept of dignity.

Through this research, I will continue my previous reflections on the constitution of the modern moral self and will open a new line of investigation into reconsideration (change of mind) as a major philosophical phenomenon.

The second project I plan to undertake is a book on the topic of changing one’s mind, a project already solicited by one of the largest publishing houses in Romania. In this work, I will develop the idea that changing one’s mind is not a weakness of character or mere inconsistency, but rather an act of moral maturity and critical autonomy. I will analyze this phenomenon as a profound reconfiguration of the self, a process through which the individual reassesses previous convictions in light of new circumstances and arguments.

The book will be structured around five paradigmatic figures: the philosopher, the saint, the artist, the scientist, and the democratic citizen. Through these figures, I will explore changing one’s mind as existential metanoia, moral conversion, aesthetic self-creation, epistemic honesty, and democratic virtue. I will show how each form of reconsideration involves a subtle balance between fidelity to oneself and openness to otherness.

Moreover, I will propose a conceptual architecture for changing one’s mind as a critical virtue, indispensable for living authentically in a complex and unstable world. I will seek to demonstrate that the most authentic form of coherence of the self does not lie in rigidity, but in a flexible fidelity to one’s personal core.

Through this project, I will continue my philosophical endeavor on the constitution of the modern self, deepening the reflection on the relationship between identity, change, and moral responsibility.