

# Authenticity and the Dynamics of Experience

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Human formation is, from birth and perhaps from before, a process of socio-cultural interaction and conceptual development within a framework of existing conceptual and material affordances. These concepts are both linguistic and non-linguistic, conveyed by gestures, facial expressions and the encoded meanings of material objects.<sup>[1]</sup> This accounts for both continuity and change. Things are the way they are in a given context because things have been the way they were; but the way things are is loose enough to allow for new developments in language, technology, design, materiality, and so on, such that humans generate as well as accumulate. Humans are – have always been – biocultural beings.<sup>[2]</sup> Insofar as they make meaning and have meaningful experiences, they make and have them through the dynamic relation of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. In fact, the unavoidable dynamism here should collapse the distinction between inside and outside, just as there is no space reserved between bio- and -culture. Body-minds form worlds and worlds form body-minds in an ever-unfolding dynamic instability.



Using Virtual Reality to treat paranoia. [Oxford Cognitive Approaches to Psychosis \(O-CAP\), University of Oxford, Artist: Josephine McInerney. Attribution 4.0 International \(CC BY 4.0\)](#)

It is possible, in this relation, for someone to attest to a *feeling* of authenticity. Here, I want to emphasize a vital distinction between the *feeling* and any essential definition of the concept of authenticity. In a recent history of authenticity, historian Maiken Umbach and political theorist Mathew Humphrey demonstrate not only that authenticity is a political concept, but that its definition is ‘constantly borrowed and adapted, across historical epochs, between opposing political ideologies, and between high culture and popular usage’.<sup>[3]</sup> There is no settled *it* and there never has been, despite a long history of efforts to locate human authenticity in a variety of ideas of nature and the natural. Nonetheless, it is generally framed as a ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ feeling. I compare this feeling with William Reddy’s ‘emotive success’, when inward feelings and prescribed outward display rules and languages of expression perfectly and apparently effortlessly accord.<sup>[4]</sup> Everything feels as it is supposed to feel according to the time and place. One is not aware of any mediation or labour to conform. It feels *genuine*. Such a feeling, however, is no less situated than any other. Moreover, such a feeling is no less political than any other. To achieve such a feeling of authenticity requires a perfect appropriation of a scripted orthodoxy, irrespective of whether that orthodoxy pertains to a hegemonic regime or to a subcultural refuge. In that moment, however fleeting, there is alignment among politics, authority, culture, memory, belief, place, knowledge, bodily practice, expression, conceptual repertoire and so on, that makes it feel *as if* it is natural, unalloyed, the ‘real’ thing, or whatever other construction one might put on the word ‘authentic’. Given such a long list, the historian should expect the feeling of authenticity to be rare. In any case, it is perhaps the feeling of *inauthenticity* that is more intellectually interesting and productive: feelings of self-doubt, uncertainty, ill-fittingness, discomfort; a lack of correspondence between inside and outside, feeling and expectation, or

feeling and display. Such a focus might be considered an extension of what Reddy called ‘emotive failure’.[\[5\]](#)

There is an increasingly multidisciplinary consensus that provides the rationale for such a focus. Social scientists Nikolas Rose and Des Fitzgerald put it this way: ‘To think of human neurobiology, today, requires us to think of a dynamic interplay in which human bodies and human environments constrain each other, mark each other, intermingle in an awkward, shuffling, embrace’.[\[6\]](#) Neurophilosopher Thomas Fuchs, in turn channelling German Philosopher Helmuth Plessner, has pointed to the ‘*mediated immediacy* of the relation between the subject and the world’ and the ‘intersubjectivity of perception’ that must ‘be acquired and learnt in early childhood’. Human perception, he avers, ‘is a form of *socialized and cultivated perception* enabled by joint attention and shared intentionality. This holds equally true for human feeling, thought and action’.[\[7\]](#) Social psychologist Paul Stenner asks scholars across the disciplines to stop thinking of ‘affect’ as a ‘pristine state of primitive unqualified autonomy’ – the seat of authenticity, if you will – and treat it instead as ‘a range of liminal phenomena tightly connected to vectors of transition, always in discrete historical settings involving multi-layered flows of embodied interaction’.[\[8\]](#) And social neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett and her acolytes attest that the brain is involved in a constant process of sensory prediction, based on previous experience and according to ‘the concepts of its culture’, concluding that emotion has a ‘highly variable and context-dependent nature’.[\[9\]](#) Here, variously described according to disciplinary logics, not in full agreement but pointing essentially in the same direction, is the critical reflection: the vicissitudes of human feeling – of feeling right and of feeling wrong; of fitting in and standing out; of authenticity and its opposite – are embedded in unstable and historical biocultural processes. For the historian, this emphasizes the necessity of contextual and conceptual reconstruction, of an understanding of situated material affordances, knowledge systems and beliefs, to disrupt any notion of a timeless authenticity.

Why emphasize this point at all? Because there is a strong historiographical tradition to the contrary that relies, usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly, on pop-psychology and evolutionary biology to flatten out what humans are and how they feel. In older traditions of the history of experience, historians entertained notions of re-experiencing the past on the basis that the very humanity of the historian would provide access to the humanity of historical figures. One only had to tap one’s own authenticity.[\[10\]](#) Though thwarted, the psychohistorical turn of the 1970s and 80s left an additional legacy of Freudian universalism in historical employment, especially in appeals to ‘affect’, which provides a convenient fantasy of access to experience on the basis of one’s own. Adding up the multidisciplinary consensus and imposing a dose of historicism, there is no longer a place for the historian to assert that ‘species similarity between subjectivities across time and place’ allows for an ‘empathic connection between the historian and her human subjects’.[\[11\]](#) History is much more difficult than that.

I conclude that authenticity cannot be understood as an essential inner or objective category. A person’s *feeling* of authenticity, or a *feeling* of being able to access the inner ‘core’ of their unmediated experience cannot be denied. Indeed, this is a worthy and important object of research. But the actual existence of such an unmediated inner core, especially as a pretext for the history of experience, must be rejected. There is not, in fact, any category of experience – emotional, affective, sensory, even interoceptive awareness – that is reducible to biological processes alone. Neither the brain, viscera, the vagus nerve, nor homeostasis are automatic and autonomic to the extent that they account for meaningful experience without

the mediation of ‘the external’ and the layers of embedded experience that come from formational time in a culture, including access to cultural memory and the ‘sticky’ objects that mark a time and a place.<sup>[12]</sup> Culture is not merely the gloss of biology. The two are wholly entangled or, as Raisa Toivo puts it, ‘like a spider’s web’.<sup>[13]</sup> Historians can only get stuck into it by targeting the dynamics of experience.

#### Notes

[1] Margrit Pernau and Imke Rajamani, ‘Emotional Translations: Conceptual History Beyond Language’, *History and Theory*, 55 (2016): 46-65.

[2] See the corresponding articles, Maria Gendron and Lisa Feldman Barrett, ‘The Brain as a Cultural Artifact’ and Rob Boddice, ‘The Cultural Brain as Historical Artifact’, both in *Culture, Mind, and Brain: Emerging Concepts, Models, and Applications*, eds Laurence J. Kirmayer, Carol M. Worthman, Shinobu Kitayama, Robert Lemelson, Constance A. Cummings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[3] Maiken Umbach and Mathew Humphrey, *Authenticity: The Cultural History of a Political Concept* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 1.

[4] William Reddy, ‘Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions’, *Current Anthropology*, 38 (1997), 337.

[5] Reddy, ‘Against Constructionism’, 332.

[6] Nikolas Rose and Des Fitzgerald, *The Urban Brain: Mental Health in the Vital City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 5.

[7] Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 170-1.

[8] Paul Stenner, *Liminality and Experience: A Transdisciplinary Approach to the Psychosocial* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 203.

[9] Katie Hoemann, Madeline Devlin and Lisa Feldman Barrett, ‘Comment: Emotions Are Abstract, Conceptual Categories That Are Learned by a Predicting Brain’, *Emotion Review*, 12 (2020): 253-5.

[10] I refer here principally to Dilthey and Collingwood. For an extended critique, see Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[11] Barbara Taylor, ‘Historical Subjectivity’, *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012), 195.

[12] Sara Ahmed, ‘Collective Feelings: Or, The Impressions Left by Others’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2004).

[13] R.M. Toivo, 'Prayer and the Body in Lay Religious Experience in Early Modern Finland', *Histories of Experience in the World of Lived Religion*, eds Sari Katajala-Peltomaa and Raisa Maria Toivo (London: Palgrave, 2022), 128.

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