# Counterpoint
## Authenticity or Bust

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RÉSUMÉ La notion de l'authenticité est devenue une préoccupation constante dans la littérature archivistique et de nombreux articles ont été consacrés à son intention, sa réalisation, voire même sa pertinence dans un contexte de gestion de documents. L'article explore ces questions en examinant le sens même du mot « authenticité » en lien avec sa fonction d'origine, à partir d'une évaluation des façons dont « la mémoire », « la preuve » et « les croyances » agissent sur sa véracité. De telles analyses concluent que la construction sociale est la manifestation la plus palpable de l'authenticité, où les documents *authentes* offrent le meilleur gabarit pour cette caractéristique polémique.

ABSTRACT The notion of authenticity has become a regular preoccupation within archival literature, and concern has been aired in numerous articles about its intention, achievability, or even relevance in a records management context. This article investigates these concerns by reconstructing the meaning of the word in relation to its original function through an evaluation of the impact of "memory," "proof," and "belief" on its veracity. Such investigations ultimately point to social construction as the most purposeful manifestation of authenticity, where the *authentes* record provides the truest of templates for this most polemic of attributes.

### Introduction

There can be few words in the English language as confusing as *authentic*. It pervades cultural heritage as a byword for "the real deal," "certified" and unequivocally "genuine," and is superficially simple enough to understand and apply. Yet its roots and currency have positioned it at the forefront of lexical polemics since it was ingested into the English language during the latter part of the Middle Ages.

For the archivist, great importance is placed on authenticity as a required property of records under his or her custodianship. In the 1920s Jenkinson argued that authenticity – along with impartiality – should be the two principal characteristics desired of all records, so that records may be "free from the

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suspicion of having been tampered with."[1] Luciana Duranti has proposed a more stringent definition of authenticity: that which "warrants that the record does not result from any manipulation, substitution, or falsification occurring after the completion of its procedure of creation."[2] In contrast the Society of American Archivists' on-line glossary recognizes a lateral relationship between a record and its creator, sounding a more cautious note on authenticity as being "inferred or presumed" through the "physical and formal characteristics" of a record.[3]

Contemporary archivists refer to guidance documents more than ever, with the standardized definition of an authentic record, described in ISO 15489, as that which can be proven "to be what it purports to be" and "to have been created or sent by those purported to have sent it"; it joins "reliability," "integrity," and "usability" as the core characteristics of authoritative records.[4] However, in light of the volume of literature generated annually on the subject by archival professionals it is, clearly, by far the most contentious and problematic of the four. On the one hand, definitions for reliability, integrity, and usability are straightforward and unambiguous. On the other, the ISO 15489 definition of authenticity seems too unsubstantiated and arbitrary for archivists to find real meaning in and purpose for.

The arbitrary nature of the ISO 15489 definition stems from the development stages of the Standard, which resulted in mistakenly treating authenticity as an adjective above all else, simplifying its role, and worse still, diluting its purpose. Comments made by Philip Jones, a collaborator in designing the Standard, indicate the evidential emphasis of authenticity: "The 'what it purports to be' part fits quite well with a concept that was generally discussed around the difference between accuracy – being factually correct – and authenticity – the record which was created for the purposes of evidence."[5] Out of this, an immediate discrepancy presents itself: an authentic record cannot be authentic just because it is claimed to be.[6] On such discrepancies

1 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford, 1922), pp. 12–13.

2 Luciana Duranti, "Reliability and Authenticity: The Concepts and Their Implications," *Archivaria* 39 (Spring 1995), pp. 7–8.

3 Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, http://www.archivists.org/glossary/ (accessed on 5 September 2009).

4 ISO 15489-1:2001(E), www.bsi-global.com, p. 7 (accessed on 26 July 2008).

5 Comments received via email on 26 March 2008 by Philip Jones, Head, Information Governance, Staffordshire County Council, UK. Additionally, there was a disproportionately large number of Australians at the meeting discussing definitions during the development stages of the Standard; Jones suggests this may have "influenced some wording," although all definitions were ratified by the entire international membership and so were completely acceptable in their universal records management usage. In light of the universal endorsement of the definitions in ISO 15489: "it would be irrelevant what the origins were" says Jones.

6 To "purport" is to claim (to be a certain thing, etc.). *Collins English Dictionary* (Glasgow,

Yvette Reisinger and Carol Steiner suggest it is inappropriate "to ask a single term to represent myriad conflicting and irreconcilable meanings," leading to confusion and rendering research "built on such a contentious term unreliable and disputable."[7]

Negotiating authenticity is, evidently, complex. It involves arbitrating the considerable struggle between subjective and evolving understandings of the entity that is authentic records, and the truthfulness of their value within an archival setting; the meaning of any expression "is not a property inherent in the wording or in the dictionary, but rather is dependent on the perceptions and practices of those who use the expression."[8] Edward Bruner concludes – after having identified four meanings of authenticity in consultation with museum professionals at New Salem (Petersburg, Illinois) – that in seeking authenticity within objects an inescapable dilemma materializes: "one never knows except by analysis of the context which meaning is salient in any given instance."[9] This dilemma undermines the literal nature and application of the commonly used definitions of authenticity as applied throughout cultural heritage. Thus, in exploring a variety of interpretations of authenticity a picture emerges of a complex term, notion, and property essential to the process of creating authoritative records so valued by archivists.

## Semantics

In terms of etymology, the word "authentike" entered Middle English literature as an Anglicized adoption of the Old French "*authentique*," in turn derived from the Latin "*authenticus*" (ca. AD 180–600).[10] Walter Skeat interprets this as "written by the author's own hand."[11] This was derived from the Greek "*authentikos*," an adjective of "*authentes*," translated as *auto* (self) + *hentes* (being), meaning, "to make or create oneself."[12] One of the earliest published definitions can be found in Thomas Elyot's 1542 *Bibliotheca*

2004), p. 1316.

7 "While any term can and almost certainly will represent a rainbow of nuanced variations on a core meaning, a term that can mean both black and white, right and wrong, light and dark, on and off, up and down at the same time is a term that is truly meaningless, without any core of meaning that can be the basis of social discourse." Yvette Reisinger and Carol J. Steiner, "Reconceptualizing Object Authenticity," *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2006), p. 81.

8 Edward M. Bruner, "Abraham Lincoln as Authentic Reproduction: A Critique of Postmodernism," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 96, no. 2 (1994), p. 399.

9 Ibid., p. 401.

10 Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (London, 1958), p. 33.

11 Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Modern Language* (Oxford, 1882), p. 43.

12 Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (Manchester, 1994), p. 54.

 

*Eliotae*, drawing on the Latin "*authenticus*" as "of authority," expanded upon in the publication's third edition as that which is "boorn or approved by him or theym that bee in aurthoritee."[13]

From Robet Cawdrey's 1604 *Table Alphabeticall* (the first monolingual dictionary in English) to those published in the middle of the twentieth century, "authentic" was largely defined as "having authority" or occasionally "genuine."[14] During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, varying expositions on the etymological connection between authenticity and authority were published, the popularized definition from the mid-eighteenth century to the twentieth century composed by Samuel Johnson, who took the view that an authentic entity should have "everything requisite to give it authority."[15] Post-war definitions place much more emphasis on being "original" and exuding "trustworthiness," with "genuineness" a regularly occurring secondary definition. Today, the meaning of the word "authentic" is neither entirely the same as that which entered the English language during the Middle Ages, nor that which came out of ancient Greece.

John Rowbotham's 1838 derivative and etymological dictionary suggests an alternative etymology: "*authenteo*," defined as "I usurp power," bringing into play the notion that the authoritative nature of an "authentic" entity is something forcefully acquired rather than achieved or earned.[16] Eric Partridge's modern interpretation of *authentes* as "one who acts on his own authority," is similarly at odds with the prescription of ISO 15489; it could be interpreted as someone who demonstrates the power of authority invested in them, or someone who autonomously motivates himself to do, say, or be something.[17]

There also appears to be a divergence in current semantics where out of the present understanding and application of the word, a new manifestation of "the authentic" has matured. A hankering for "that which once was" has produced a cultural shift in society, where the past is yearned for with envy. Through rose-tinted spectacles we lament the passing of a society with perceivably less crime and more social etiquette.[18] We look to the past for answers; the propensity to research our ancestral heritage has never been so

13 Thomas Elyot, *Bibliotheca Eliotae Eliotis Librarie*, 3rd ed. (London [1545], 1548).

14 The word "authenticall" is defined as "of authoritie, allowed by authoritie: the originall," in Robert Cawdrey, *Table Alphabeticall* (London, 1604).

15 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1756), http://www.archive.org/stream/dictionaryofengl02john (accessed on 31 August 2008).

16 John Rowbotham, *A New Derivative and Etymological Dictionary of Such English Words as have their Origin in the Greek and Latin Languages* (London, 1838), p. 32.

17 Partridge, p. 33.

18 Authenticity "is often freighted with the burden of the golden past, a nostalgia for an earlier age that seems, in retrospect, more real." Nathaniel Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (Lincoln, 2003), p. 5.

popular. We place so much value on the authentic past by which "we are now so besotted" that this version of authenticity has more to do with an illusion of the past than the actual past.[19] Such a version is unobtainable as it would require, as Richard Handler and William Saxton state, a "total accounting" and "complete understanding" to elevate it to the realms of complete authenticity; "the final hindrance to complete authenticity is the impossibility of recovering the subjective experience(s) of … the past."[20] The aura of the authentic past probably has its roots in the societal change from scholasticism to enlightenment, where religious and academic instruction moved from acceptance to questioning: "This is fact!" was replaced by "Is this fact?"[21]

It naturally follows that to have an authentic record implies the existence of the very opposite, the inauthentic record, and if we also include untrustworthy records we can designate records broadly into one of three categories: the authentic, the inauthentic, and those of questionable authenticity. Due to the importance of provenance and original order, only the first category should be truly acceptable to archivists. They are charged with the task of ascertaining authenticity, and it is through this evaluative process that a light is shone on the provenance of authenticity itself – fact and evidence. A claim of authenticity is based on evidence, and evidence is based on a predetermined fact or facts. If any one of those founding facts is proven to be false, a record loses its authenticity and therefore its credibility as an authoritative record. In discussing object authenticity (a term used for the "genuineness of artefacts and events"), Reisinger and Steiner conclude that "it is not appropriate to ask a single term to represent myriad conflicting and irreconcilable meanings," leading to confusion and rendering research "built on such a contentious term unreliable and disputable."[22]

Thus, the application of authenticity is hindered on several fronts: its subjectivity as a term; the subjectivity of its application; and the existence of intermediary and opposite states. For example, authenticity is commonly discussed in terms of degrees (i.e., being "more" or "less" authentic), but then if an x and y point should be expected, such an outcome would make it scalable and referential. Conversely, authenticity without a reference point is quite

19 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 231. "[N]o historical account ever corresponds precisely with any actual past" because of "the immensity of the past itself, the distinction between past events and accounts of those events, and the inevitability of bias" (p. 214).

20 Richard Handler and William Saxton, "Dyssimulation: Reflexivity, Narrative, and the Quest for Authenticity in 'Living History'," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1988), p. 245.

21 Klaus Nürnberger, *Theology of the Biblical Witness: An Evolutionary Approach* (Berlin, 2003), p. 101. Nürnberger distinguishes between authenticity and fact in relation to truth: "Fact refers to what is. Authenticity refers to what ought to be" (p. 101).

22 Reisinger and Steiner, p. 81.

 

arbitrary and indefinable; we could then say that there is no such thing as authenticity, only varying degrees of inauthenticity. How do we know when we have reached the nth degree and achieved authenticity? In accepting such manifestations it becomes entirely plausible that a record's authenticity could be weakened or strengthened through examination, and such an act of challenging could erode its authenticity to the extent that it becomes irrelevant. Nathaniel Lewis holds a more progressive view of inauthenticity as "something copied, constructed, often commodified," suggesting it to have the subservient function of re-inscribing and "legitimizing the power of authenticity itself," and that to "distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic is to promote the very idea of authenticity."[23]

The problems with authenticity are just as acute for digital records. For example, the term "authentic copy" is commonly used, but is it possible for a copy of an object (digital or otherwise) to possess or inherit authenticity? Is not the "authentic copy," as defined by ISO 15489 as what it purports to be, oxymoronic by its very nature? It could be argued that the notion of the "authentic copy" that permeates digital records is difficult to achieve as complete authenticity can only be realized through a recreation encompassing the "experience" of the interaction with the original system, as well as the inclusion of syntactic and semantic properties. As "experience" is theoretically positioned at the beginning of the information spectrum, or more aptly, the first stages of evolution of information, it must also have its authenticity tested.[24]

Authenticity, as defined by ISO 15489, has a functioning role at the beginning, middle, and end of the information spectrum, starting with conceived or acquired knowledge, transferred or imparted as information, and ultimately made into object form. A schema such as this can only work (and consequently its requisite authenticity can only prove effective) if that on which it is founded – memory and experience – is subject to the same tests. In rooting authenticity in memory (as an evidential term) we need to be assured of the truthfulness of that memory. Bernard Lewis's comments on truth further confuse the issue: "since there is no such thing as truth, there is no such thing as authenticity; these are irrelevant and meaningless, even misleading, concepts."[25] It seems logical then that in order to understand "authenticity" (if it can meaningfully manifest itself) and its place in the physical and digital archive, it needs to be re-evaluated in terms of its context, and how

23 Nathaniel Lewis, p. 6.

24 The information spectrum stages are: knowledge, information, documents, records, and archives. Caroline Williams, *Managing Archives: Foundations, Principles and Practice* (Oxford, 2006), p. 15.

25 Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East* (Oxford, 2004), p. 387.

it best serves the purposes and remit of the archivist. With such emphasis placed on creating and maintaining authentic records within the record-keeping environment (and bearing in mind the fundamental importance of good recordkeeping within an organization), is the archival community best served by placing so much currency on a Pandora's Box?[26] Three concepts pivotal to the success or failure of "authenticity" warrant further analysis. They are "memory," "proof," and "belief."

## Memory and the "Unknown Past"

Authenticity and the information spectrum are theoretical bedfellows. If we accept the possibility that a record can be "authentic" under ISO 15489's conditions, it would be entirely justified to expect "authenticity" to be present during the stages leading up to the arrival of this full-blown record; if a record can be authentic then why not the parts of the process that created it? First-hand information (i.e., knowledge passed directly from one person to another) could be perceived as indisputably authentic between the imparter and the receiver because it is automatically what it purports to be; it is the "real deal" and certifiable because the receiver has physical (and/or visual) communication with the imparter. Of course, such retrograde connectivity can be extended back to the inception of knowledge itself, suggesting the ISO standard definition is too narrow and insular in what it pertains to. Knowledge and information, as invisible entities, should be viewed as constituent parts or building blocks of a record: its heritage. Should a record not be considerably more authentic if the authenticity of its heritage was also verified as "authentic?"

From knowledge we regress to its container, memory, and in such a vessel the concept of authenticity is theoretically conceived. Memory can be perceived as "a marker of the lived experience" through which individualism comes into being, possessing an authenticity of its own.[27] Memory, as the information spectrum's catalyst, is populated by the "collective memory" of past experiences and with redress to the actual collective memories we call archives.[28] At every stage in this process there is an opportunity for subjectivity to infiltrate, as the "truth" of memory is that its authenticity "rests in

26 The "Pandora's Box" analogy was used in relation to the *Venice Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites* (1964) and subsequent debates at the NARA Conference on Authenticity (1994). See Randolph Starn, "Authenticity and Historic Preservation: Towards an Authentic History," *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2002), p. 9.

27 Allan Megill, "History, Memory, Identity," *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1998), p. 50.

28 Memory does not feature in Williams's information spectrum.

 

selective perception that entails selective memory."[29] Because of these intangibles, memory must be one of the first issues to consider when proclaiming authenticity because its veracity as a "reliable repository of past experience" is paramount.[30]

Of all the building blocks of a record, memory is the most dichotomous. It can be subjective and objective, authentic and inauthentic, and it is almost entirely at the mercy of the physical condition of the brain. Several factors play a part in the brain's limitation and inevitable degradation (to some degree) of truthful memory; for example, "forgetfulness is what allows a subjectivity to emerge."[31] Through memory, future records are first conceived, and because of this, memory has a central role in any determination of what is meant to mean "authentic," as everything we do involves the ingesting, processing, and/or dissemination of forms of information. Of course, it is conceivable that memory can be subliminally, covertly, or forcefully infiltrated, and because of this some historians view long-term memory with ingrained suspicion.[32]

Memory's "authentic" aspirations fail at the rudimentary stages. First, remembering the intricate content of a past event is such a complex feat to recover in full that we are effectively left with snippets of information, some large, some small, but nonetheless snippets. When this is processed through the information spectrum we are left with the analogous quicksand built on quicksand, and end up with a cumulatively matured "authentic" object that is not authentic at all. We are defeated from the very beginning by the volume of information to be remembered, our mental limitations, and length of time between the "now" and the "then": the "sheer pastness of the past."[33] In attempting to remember the fullness of the past, any future authentic outcome could mean "fidelity to feeling that swamps facts in anachronistic invention … so *engagé* as to include very little of the actual past."[34]

Less scrupulous record custodians have a tendency to stick their heads in the sand when it comes to thoroughly investigating their collections, opting instead for a safer pair of hands: utopian authenticity. This is where collection items have already had their provenance audited and validated by the very fact they are housed in an archive: a place in which those consulting records perceive there to be no "doubt"; the kudos of such an institution increases

29 Reisinger and Steiner, p. 81.

30 Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Evidence* (1987; repr. Plymouth, 1988), p. 117.

31 Megill, p. 49.

32 Lummis, p. 117.

33 Lowenthal, p. 215. Lowenthal argues that "the most detailed historical narrative incorporates only a minute fraction of even the relevant past."

34 Ibid., p. 231.

the historical value and weight of an item housed in it, whether it is proven or not. This contradicts the postmodernist view that archives are "houses of memories … access[ing] a continuously rerooting past."[35] This "rerooting" is an inevitable consequence of our inclination toward questioning what we know (our memory) and the historical resources that populate what we know (collective memory); both types of memory connect the two ends of the extended information spectrum – from memory to archives.

Postmodernism does not sit well with the scenario of a perpetually referencing authenticity made possible by the transition between memory and archives as both beginning and end of the information spectrum. Because memory is "archivally dependant" and therefore part of a chain of references, everything is referential and consequently nothing is uniquely definable. This referential foundation of authenticity, throughout its journey from memory through to archives and between archives and the memories they create, should not be the premise on which any record should be qualifying the truth and genuineness of its own existence. It is prone to corruption in the same way as the dictionary definition has suffered over time. As a guidance standard ISO 15489 is term-led and its remit does not touch on the weightier and more philosophical considerations encompassing authenticity and its relationship to information science (although the subject has been more comprehensively debated and dealt with in the arts and humanities community). As a consequence, we have to look toward philosophical literature to show us more cogent, compelling, and subtle alternatives to Johnsonian authenticity.

Ironically, Johnson's definition of "memory" is far more succinct and useful for the purposes of explaining what we, in the twenty-first century, believe it to be: "the power of retaining or recollecting things past; that faculty by which we call to mind any past transactions."[36] This description of memory notes a dual purpose: to ingest and impart. As with memory as a whole, these two defining elements are both vulnerable to corruption, the consequences of which are catastrophic to the authenticity of any record. The manner in which memory is ingested and imparted is pivotal to the construction and authenticity of records created further down the information stream. Having taken on board the various meanings of authenticity and memory individually, we can assume "authentic memory" to be a conglomeration of the two. Inevitably, a bonding of such polemic notions means authentic memory can mean different things to different people.

For all the discursive commentary, memory's fate really lies in how

35 Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, "Archives and Social Memory: Introduction," in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, eds. Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, 2007), p. 166.

36 Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

 

convinced we are by its value as historical evidence and as a property on which authenticity can be built. To determine this, memory has to be viewed as one part – albeit a fundamental one – of a more encompassing foundation on which records are created and deemed "authentic."

## Proof of the Certainty of Anything

If memory is a form of historical evidence, then proof is the arbiter of that evidence. If the memory constituent of a record is its genes, proof is the DNA test. In order for a record to be authentic it must be founded on authentic memory that has been certified by proof, as in "proving" something we seek to "demonstrate the truth by evidence or argument."[37] Memory, which carries evidence and forms an integral part of the information spectrum, has to be conjoined with a requirement of proof if it is ever to be associated with anything authentic. Within this requirement, proof can be seen as a subcomponent of memory as it tests that which has already been presented as opposed to memories that are created through experience. Additionally, we could argue that all information spectrum stages demand a requirement of proof because of the fundamental connection between memory and evidence, and its binding role in holding together the purposeful existence of a record.

In binding memory and evidence, an assumption can be made that the further along the path of the information spectrum we get, questions of proof become more straightforward to answer in the context of the evidence in which it seeks to find truth. This only happens if the veracity of memory, evidence, and proof are sufficiently scrutinized, the resultant effect being that successive layers of information stages become increasingly authentic in the lexical sense. The problem, as we have already discussed, is that evidence is based on memory, and memory management is cyclic ad infinitum without a static reference point. This means that a record is constructed from both referential memory and proof, complicated further by proof also being contextual in the temporal sense. If, however, we are willing to accept the inevitability of this referential paradox, it is at the record stage of the information cycle that proof is easiest (or least complicated) to establish because records are fixed and so are any acquired evidential qualities.

Proof, as well as memory, is also problematic due to its cyclical nature. In order to prove something we require evidence; evidence is a subjective and selective presentation of pre-existing facts, and facts are determined through proof. "Fact" in its original meaning is, rather confusingly, uniquely temporal – "a thing done or performed" – which differs from the definition familiar to

37 *Oxford English Dictionary*, definition 1 of "prove" (v.), http://www.oed.com (accessed on 15 August 2008).

records managers and archivists as "something that is true, something that actually exists, or something that can be verified according to an established standard of evaluation."[38] The "proof" component of fact acts as the grand inquisitor, and only when this process is concluded and a consensus has been reached does evidence, in conjunction with an implicit or explicit theory or hypothesis, become fact. Most historians understand facts in terms of "fragments of past experience that can be verified by some reliable source."[39] But, if history has shown us one thing it is that evidence is subjective and "facts," like authenticity, are also subjective and exist to be challenged. The archivist's "fact" is, in reality, a combination of definitions: it has to have already happened, and also be true and verified following an established standard of evaluation.

*The Declaration of San Antonio*, a guidance document on the practical approaches to preserving authenticity in the "architectural, urban, archaeological, and cultural landscape of the Americas," states that properties such as character and traditions are likely to take precedence over material and design aspects.[40] It notes that a "clear relationship between values and the proof of authenticity should be established," meaning that proof indicators need not necessarily be tangible.[41] Five indicators are explicitly mentioned: 1) reflection of the true value; 2) integrity; 3) context; 4) identity; and 5) use and function. Although "integrity" and "context" will be familiar terms to the records management profession, the semantics of these indicators differ from those generally used in the field of archival science.[42] We can learn much from the San Antonio declaration about the relationship between proof and authenticity in an archival context, and its applicability to the records management process.

The first indicator – reflection of the true value – places importance on a resource (e.g., a record) being maintained in the "condition of its creation" and reflecting "all its significant history."[43] The first part of this indicator can be compared with the combined characteristics of "reliability" and "integrity" defined in ISO 15489, in that it is both "complete and unaltered," "and can be trusted as a full and accurate representation," etc.[44] The second indica-

38 *Wikipedia*, definition of "fact," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fact (accessed on 15 August 2008).

39 Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 85.

40 *The Declaration of San Antonio*, Section B, http://www.icomos.org/docs/san_antonio.html (accessed on 16 August 2008). The declaration followed a March 1996 symposium organized by the International Council on Monuments and Sites to discuss the meaning of authenticity in preservation in the Americas.

41 Ibid., section C4 (g).

42 Ibid., section C1 (c).

43 Ibid.

44 ISO 15489, p. 7.

 

tor – integrity – refers to an appraisal of the current condition of the record as opposed to the record being "complete and unaltered." The third indicator – context – is comparable with archival "context" in that a record has to be viewed in the context of those around it (i.e., in the same collection or series). The fourth indicator – identity – can be translated into archival terms as meaning a personal and emotive relationship between a record and those who come into contact with it (identity is not mentioned in any context in ISO 14589). The fifth indicator – use and function – concerns traditional patterns of use associated with a specific record.

In proving authenticity, the purpose of the fourth indicator in *The Declaration of San Antonio* – identity – is perhaps the most useful. We have talked about fact as a product of proof and proof as a product of evidence, but what about the interactive experience between a record and its users as a characteristic of proven authenticity? Can a record have a "relationship" with its user? On the surface it seems highly unlikely that subjective experience would have any part to play in the process of proving a record's authenticity; to date, the concept of proof has had its basis in facts, albeit subjective and referential. However, these facts are arbitrary: evidence cherry-picked to prove the validity or truthfulness of something is also procedurally subjective. As knowledge becomes experiential "subjective proof of acquaintance with an object's existence and nature"[45] is required. This "proof of acquaintance" as implied by theologian Karl Barth, concerns the reality, existence, and nature of an object becoming true to itself and to those "experiencing" it. Phillips's translation is more succinct: it involves "assimilating meaning from an object beyond acknowledgement of its external existence"; Barth, via Phillips, stakes a claim for proof's experiential side.[46]

The outcome of the process of proving authenticity by fact-based evidence is the establishment of the truth pervading every layer of a record. We know that memory and truth have an uneasy relationship but does the same apply to truth as the result of a test of proof? Some have argued that truth cannot exist without absolute truth, and absolute truth cannot exist without absolute reality. Nürnberger observes a broader outlook for truth: it can refer to fact, validity, *and* authenticity.[47] With validity roughly equatable with "proof," Nürnberger taps into the three juxtaposed strands of what proven records should aspire to be, which, by way of authenticity, connect to the four requirements of an authoritative record (see Figure 1) set out in IS0 15489: "all three are subject to historical flux, situational specificity and social power play."[48]

45 Donald E. Phillips, *Karl Barth's Philosophy of Communication* (New York, 1981), p. 125.
46 Ibid., p. 126.
47 Nürnberger, p. 101.
48 Ibid.

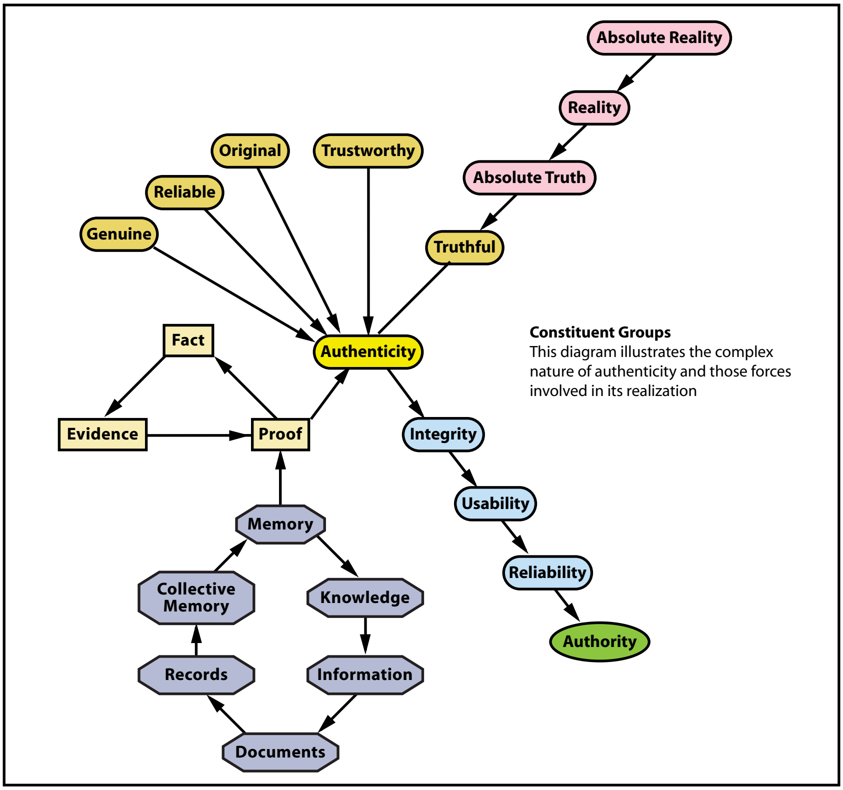


**Figure 1:** A schematic diagram illustrating the various characteristics and processes fundamental to realizing authority records

Historical re-evaluation, a factual and perceptual drift, inevitably causes problems when ascertaining the "truth" or fact of a record. With a broad range of meanings associated with authenticity over time (e.g., Cawdrey, Johnson, etc.), and "former usages gaining new connotations as the term was adjusted by successive generations of scholars," the evolution of authenticity, as shown through published examples in the introduction to this paper, would seem to support Nürnberger's observation.[49] Linguistically authenticity also has to keep pace with "ideological fluctuations of language use and the changing goals of such language use over time and across context."[50] Such continual changes in perceptions of fact and evidence only serve to under-

49 Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, 1997), p. 15.
50 Ibid.

 

mine the truth of authenticity claims.

The situational specificity of a record influences its formation and affects its authenticity, as the way a record is created, the conditions at the time of creation, and the condition of those who created it are imperfectly known. Part of the allure of authenticity is to reconstruct that which we do not fully know, and these unknowns are tackled by "seizing on the information that comes incidentally with them, which it must be said does serve our immediate purpose."[51] Due to the disparate characteristics of each record within a collection, the temptation is to engineer evidence and proof to fit our needs in order to support a record's legitimacy. Michel Foucault's view on the effects of cultural conventions (or circumstances) in which records are created and kept is explained:

> "… the kind of authenticity embedded in written documents not only reflects particular cultural conventions but also tends to obscure the possibility that the documents were created and retained in most "unscientific" ways. Can we therefore agree that in either case, the "written-ness" of most archival documents affects what is and can be remembered, and how?"[52]

In reading between the lines, Foucault is saying two things here: the meaning of authenticity is adjusted by and for each culture; and this process of adjustment ultimately degrades the legitimacy of authenticity. Proof works in a similar way to Nürnberger's second strand by being the means to its own fallibility. It is frequently adjusted to suit the climate of the time and/or cultural prevalence, and so does not necessarily provide the firmest of footings on which to base a claim of authenticity.

Proof, in theoretical terms, requires evidence or an argument for a particular truth and a belief in the certainty of something. Because "evidence," and by due process, "fact," are subjective terms we have to assume that "proof" does not prove the certainty of anything. As such it does little to validate the factuality of a record.

## A New "Authentic"

Having discussed and disregarded the applications of commonly used notions of "authenticity" we need to look toward viable and acceptable alternatives. Johnson's definition of, or model for, authenticity ("everything requisite to give it authority"), which stood for over two centuries as the final word on

51 Brian Spooner, "Weavers and Dealers: Authenticity and Oriental Carpets," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), p. 199.

52 Comment on Foucault's views on authenticity. See Blouin and Rosenberg, p. 165.

the matter, emphasized that it pertains only to things (i.e., objects) and "never used of persons."[53] His definition implied that in becoming authentic something acquires or contains a set of characteristics, elements, or properties, and in doing so is validated as authoritative. The "requisite" relates to the collection of a body of evidence, and the process of elevation from an authentic state to one of authority relates to the factuality of those required properties. This process parallels the evidence/fact relationship previously discussed, even though the historical connection between authority and authenticity does not tackle any of the aforementioned paradoxes that surface when examining the characteristics of authenticity in detail. All this leaves one glaring problem: At what point do we decide a record has "everything requisite?" This question lies at the heart of the property-driven authenticity described by Johnson and those who followed.

ISO 15489 presents the unchanged record as having the most credible claim to authenticity. It is unchanged in the sense that the process of its creation has not been tampered with (i.e., the author is the same person who created the record). Pope John Paul II, in reference to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* in 2003, inadvertently summed up in just four words the essence of that which is unchanging: "*é come é stato*" ("it is as it was").[54] However, it is as a stand-alone statement that its profundity is particularly striking. It epitomizes the *unchangingness* of something, anything, or everything, and at the same time avoids any sort of connection with something copied or duplicated; in this event the statement would then be "it is *like* it was." The word "as" is, therefore, key to the power of the Pope's statement, and its presence merges the present ("it is") and past ("it was") so that both are one and the same; the record is now exactly as it was, it is unchanged. This "Papal authenticity," though philosophically agreeable, is still vulnerable to those problems associated with memory and proof.

Perhaps authenticity is best served by not treating it as a term at all. After all, we have established that it is subjective on many levels, the nature of its application is specific to region and time, and that its currency ebbs and flows. This leaves us with the possibility that it should be viewed more as a concept. The concept of authority also "serves as a corrective to misuses of the term *authenticity*" and this ascendancy of authority is certainly supported by the central role authenticity plays as a characteristic of an authority record.[55]

53 Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*.

54 Peggy Noonan, "It Is as It Was" (17 December 2003), http://www.opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/?id=110004442 (accessed on 22 August 2008).

55 The implications of such a "corrective" are that "in raising the issue of who authenticates, the nature of the discussion is changed. No longer is authenticity a property inherent in an object, forever fixed in time; it is seen as a struggle, a social process, in which competing interests argue for their own interpretation of history." Bruner, p. 408.

 

Bruner's "corrective" demotes authenticity to a mere stepping stone, a means to an end. His notion of authenticity revives the central role of authority seen in the early English translations of the Latin "*authenticus*," steering well clear of originality and truth, which are currently well-used synonyms for authenticity.

Authenticity, as a relative concept, reaches its zenith when considering a straightforward yet rarely asked question: Authentic to what?[56] Philosopher Henry Nelson Goodman postulated that "nothing is authentic per se … [and that questions like] … 'is it authentic'? must be replaced by, or understood as, a question of the form 'is it an (or the) authentic so-and-so'?"[57] In doing so we replace subjective for objective reasoning ("Is it authentic?" to "Is it an authentic so-and-so?"); implicit in such questioning is the notion that as records managers and archivists we are approaching an understanding of authenticity from the wrong perspective. We should look carefully at what the intended goals of authenticity are, why it is important to individual records or whole collections, and ask ourselves how collections can benefit from the characteristic, property, or concept of authenticity (or that the remaining characteristics, such as reliability, usability, and integrity are adequate in themselves). In viewing authenticity relatively, the primary focus is on locating the "other," the point of reference by which we can gauge the authenticity of our record. Relative authenticity relies for the most part on the essential characteristics of "recordness" in establishing key attributes that can then be used to express the "value" of the record. However, the "other" may not necessarily be another record or collection of records; realistically it could be any entity – as long as it provides context and proof.

Likelihood is inextricably associated with authenticity, especially within the context of records management. In light of the paucity of objective facts, decisions on whether a record is authentic come down to what the record's custodian is prepared to believe or accept. Meaning is negotiable and resolvable: a battle of ideas in which such negotiations resolve inherent uncertainties with a record. A negotiation takes place between these troublesome aspects and the "authentic" criteria, and a decision is made based on probability or likelihood. Brian Spooner asks: "How and why do we negotiate standards of

56 In raising this question, S. Messick highlights the "fundamental ambiguity that pervades all authentic assessment practices." As quoted in J.T.M. Guliker, "Authenticity is in the Eye of the Beholder," *OpenUniversiteitNederland Report* (2006), p. 2, http://www.ou.nl/Docs/Expertise/OTEC/Publicaties/judith%20gullikers/Thesis%20Gulikers%20v4.pdf (accessed on 20 August 2008).

57 Taken from the definition of "Authenticity" in Grove Art Online (www.oxfordartonline.com). American philosopher Henry Nelson Goodman (1906–1998), believed that: "Seeking answers to questions of authenticity, like seeking answers to most important questions, is a difficult process often yielding only tentative results," www.oxfordartonline.com (accessed on 30 July 2008).

authenticity as distinct from quality?"[58] The answer would have to be that the latter has equal impact as both a positive and pejorative term, whereas with the former its relevance can be degraded; if something is "less authentic" we have to ask "what is it less authentic to," and whether such questioning degrades the authority of authenticity as a meaningful description.[59] As a compromise, authenticity could be considered a "quality of experience" rather than something that is reliant on the quality of characteristics that make something authentic. For example, a record's provenance may be accurately recorded but the quality of the recording process might not be sound.

The enlightened postmodernist views authenticity as a social construct: the invisible connector of disparate entities. Social construction can be defined as "any phenomenon 'invented' or 'constructed' by participants in a particular culture or society existing because people agree to behave as if it exists or follows certain conventional rules."[60] It can also be defined as an idea "which may appear to be natural and obvious to those who accept it, but in reality is an invention or artefact of a particular culture or society."[61] Both definitions imply that different views are based on social circumstances and ways of seeing, interpreting, interrelating, and interacting with the environment. Social construction would certainly go some way toward explaining and understanding the difficulties in coming to an agreed meaning for authenticity. Bruce Baugh finds a perfectly adequate use for constructed authenticity as a critical and descriptive process, in that regardless of the fine details, it is a positive characteristic, and, therefore, is preferable to inauthenticity. He uses authenticity as a guide to shedding light on the distinctive properties that something has to have to make it authentic by treating authenticity as the arbiter of what is real while also figuring as the "dark source" within.[62]

For an authentic construct to be effective its veracity and the purpose of its construction need to be tested to ascertain whether it fulfills its remit. The remit of constructed authenticity is to bestow a very specific status on a record, giving the impression that it is what it purports to be. We pretend that we and our records are adhering to guidelines; we may believe that they are authentic but we are constructing a belief in our ISO 15489-compliant authenticity when in fact we are putting our trust in an imaginary construct.

58 Spooner, p. 203.

59 "The notion of authenticity implies the existence of its opposite, the fake, and this dichotomous construct is at the heart of what makes authenticity problematic." Bendix, p. 9.

60 Definition of "Social construction," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_construction (accessed on 20 August 2008).

61 Definition of "Social constructionism," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_constructionism (accessed on 20 August 2008).

62 Bruce Baugh, "Authenticity Revisited," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 4 (1988), p. 477.

 

We assume a record has not been tampered with but this is virtually impossible to guarantee. For these and other reasons, the outcome is the construction of an imaginary authenticity. This is superficially very effective in making us believe we are describing something as authentic, when in fact what we are describing is an imaginary entity in order to fulfill our quest for a truthful reality. Even though constructed authenticity is created from nothing to fill a purpose-shaped hole in our mechanical and philosophical understanding of what a record should be, it should still be subjected to the same levels of scrutiny expected of literal interpretations of authenticity.

The absurdity of constructed authenticity is that we use something entirely non-existent whose singular purpose is to describe its antithesis: complete objectivity. Yet in spite of this absurdity, the concept of authenticity as a social construct is very easily understood and ingested into our psyche because constructs are manifold throughout our society. Socially constructed authenticity is, in many ways, as viable an approach to understanding and practically applying authenticity as literal meanings of the word, and despite many failings it may have a role in records management, assuming that guidance on authenticity taken from ISO 15489 is put to one side. However, if our records were to be enhanced by such a construction, an inevitable sacrifice would have to be made. As records management professionals we would need to abandon our desire for truthful records and instead work toward the much more realistic task of maintaining them to the best of our abilities. A record true to itself will only ever exude its truthfulness relative to absolute truth.

Martin Heidegger's notion of authenticity pertains to the individual and starkly contrasts with Johnson's view. In terms of etymology, Heideggerian "authenticity" must take precedence because his approach is the only one firmly rooted in the ancient Greek *auto* (self) *hentes* (being), whose message seems to have been lost in the very early stages of translation. The individual is central to the original Greek notion of "authentic," a notion developed by Heidegger in his seminal work, *Being and Time*: "human beings are authentic when they make their existence their own by deciding for themselves what it is to be a human being."[63] Such an approach may be worth transferring to a records management environment. Heidegger views the question of "being" as "its own distinctive character" and that the process of inquiry (e.g., into a record) is also a process of "seeking." His "being" is at the centre of all inquiries:

> Every inquiry is a seeking. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought. Inquiry is a cognizant seeking for an entity both with regard to the fact that it is and with regard to its Being as it is. This cognizant seeking can take the form of "inves-

63 Heidegger, quoted in Ibid., p. 478.

tigating," in which one lays bare that which the question is about and ascertains its character.[64]

We can deduce from this that to deal effectively with records so they are what they intend to be, we must first work out what we *want* them to be. Quality records can only be realized after prior consideration has been given to our own expectations of what the purpose and intention of the records are. Instead of looking to authenticate authenticity through a series of characteristics or properties, it may be more circumspect to extract elements from notions of authenticity both within and outwith the archival domain. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist authenticity places great importance on taking responsibility for the entirety of one's existence; in terms of the record, the obvious parallel would be its provenance.[65] A record's provenance should account for, and cover, the entirety of its life, and just as fact and evidence control the provenance of authenticity, authenticity of a record's provenance is the ongoing responsibility of its custodians. Unfortunately, existential authenticity does not factor in the influences of outside forces and their inevitable shaping of things. With regards to the arrangement of collections, such shaping (or bias) amounts to a rejection of the principles of original order, where the archivist is compelled to "avoid putting on spin" when interpreting a collection.[66]

Charles Taylor's authentic ideal states that individual records can only be true to their own originality by being true to themselves.[67] This ideal compels a record to "speak" or announce its truth. As truth is relative it is more feasible to suggest records should seek to be *realistically* true to themselves in order to become true to their own originality. By articulating such truth the record may start to define its own existence and ultimately find its own "authenticity," regardless of whether the information it contains is reliable. On this, Lionel Trilling suggests self-sufficiency, self-definition, and sincerity as a means of characterizing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "sentiment of being," which refers to "the individual's self-consciousness or awareness of his own existence."[68] Authenticity can be described as "the core of genuine existence … a value which must center in the individual who bears it."[69] Therefore, the centre of a genuine record draws on its authenticity to justify its existence,

64 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit* (Oxford, 1962), p. 24.
65 Ibid.
66 Williams, p. 14.
67 Nathaniel Lewis, p. 3.
68 Rousseau's concept was eventually incorporated into the idea of personal authority: "to be authentic is to follow one's own desires, feelings, and creative spark – to be autonomous." Quoted in Richard Stivers, *Shades of Loneliness: Pathologies of a Technological Society* (Lanham, 2004), p. 11.
69 Marjorie Grene, "Authenticity: An Existential Virtue," *Ethics*, vol. 62, no. 4 (1952), p. 272.

 

meaning, and purpose. This completeness must come from and exist within the core, as truly authentic records are those that have always authentically existed and not those that have procured it. A record must always have been authentic rather than "become" authentic: inherence over acquisition.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this discussion has been to examine the various meanings and applications of "authenticity" within a records management environment. Since ISO 15489 was published in 2001, this standard has generally been accepted as a template for, and guidance on, the proficient and professional maintenance of records. Much of the published literature concerning archives and records management practices has naturally been produced by those actively engaged in, or academically connected with, the profession, and as a consequence of its allegiance to ISO 15489, open debate on some aspects of this standard has been minimal. In order to facilitate a meaningful and worthwhile dialogue on the subject of authenticity, many of the cited sources have deliberately and unapologetically come from other fields of knowledge (e.g., archaeology, aesthetics, art, music, philosophy, and tourism). By approaching the subject of authenticity from a range of perspectives (particularly those without any obvious investment in ISO 15489), we are not only able to understand more about what authenticity means, but we are in a position to take a more objective view on whether it benefits or hinders the due processes of records management.

"Memory," "proof," and "belief" have been chosen for extended analysis because they are three tacit processes that help define authenticity on the one hand, yet debunk it on the other. The first two processes play crucial roles in the establishment of authenticity; the third describes the commonly held view of it. We have illustrated that all three are fundamentally flawed – "memory" and "proof" are referential, and "belief" relates to constructs – and as such authenticity has become the new intangible. Our perceived understanding of authenticity works to a certain extent, but like our understanding of the universe, there comes a time when we just cannot answer the questions that need answering. With authenticity, the "unknown past," the problems of proving the certainty of something, and the "head in the sand" construct, all conspire against the idea that something can "be the thing it is," although we still use the term "authenticity" as if it is completely acceptable.

Perhaps the answer is to accept the inherent failings of authenticity and commit to some notion of it in order to provide a way of marking quality in the records we maintain. The most personally appealing approach to authenticity is, ironically, the hardest to define in objective terms: the construct. There is now a significant body of evidence supporting the theory that human imagination devises all manner of constructs in order to provide meaning and comfort to those parts of personal reality we would otherwise find unfathomable. Like religion there is strength in numbers: the masses believe in something intangible so surely, on the balance of probability, they cannot all be wrong? Just as religious belief seems natural and obvious to those who accept it as the truth, so does constructed authenticity. We invariably behave as if authenticity exists because it suits us, even though we may be well aware that as a construct it does not actually exist; we turn a blind eye to the truth. Where the failings of traditional uses of authenticity come from inconsistencies in the building of a record from memory to fully proven entity, constructed authenticity is built on an act of faith, where its inherent subjectivity lends it well to being considered a "belief" concept.[70]

We believe a record is authentic because (1) we are told it is; (2) history tells us it is; and therefore (3) we believe it to be so. Rarely do we personally attempt to ascertain authenticity of our own volition. The reasons are practical enough – lack of time and personnel – but such investigations can only accentuate the uniqueness and historical value of our collections. We need to take a personal and scholarly interest in how records are created, and how they relate to the facts represented within them and to their creator, thus enabling us to "identify, evaluate, and communicate, their nature and authenticity."[71]

We can still impose a philosophical and historical grounding on our construct by drawing on the previously mentioned Greek *auto* (self) + *hentes* (being) etymology. The *authentes* record, which, after all, should rightly be considered the most truthful template for authenticity, owes its authenticity only to itself, not to memory or proof. To "make or create" a record is to create an authentic record. What happens thereafter is a matter for those who come into contact with it. Although a "belief" in authenticity places it among the three imperfect processes, it is perfect in its imperfection. It does not make any demands other than that it is a vehicle for making sense out of the senseless. It is an act of faith and an investment in an ideal. It is a belief concept based on personal experience and pre-meditated bias.

It is, therefore, inevitable that realizing authenticity involves concessions to avoid a nihilistic future for authentic archival collections: a concession to subjectivity, personal experience, and belief that records can, and will, impart their own reality unto us. The Heideggerian record's prerogative is to define itself, whether at the point of creation or further down the line when it is left to gather dust in an archive. Our interaction with that record is both constructed in that we believe it contains the aura of authenticity, and personal in that

70 Lowenthal uses the example of replica objects to illustrate the extent to which this belief can be taken; he suggests that: "only authentic objects are replica ones because people enjoy the actual knowledge of contrivance." Lowenthal, p. 356.

71 Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary.*

we should be compelled to make investigations into its being. In doing so, we can approach records as capturers of past reality, embodying the "core of genuine existence."[72]

72 Grene, p. 272.