

Open Peer Commentary on “Personality and authenticity in light of the memory-modifying potential of optogenetics” by Zawadzki and Adamczyk

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Why authenticity hinges on narrative identity

Przemysław Zawadzki and Agnieszka Adamczyk contribute to and expand the important neuroethical debate on memory modification techniques (MMTs). They offer an insightful and nuanced analysis of the potential of optogenetics for memory modification, the relation of various memory systems to three levels of personality, and the ethical implications of manipulating memories. I agree that it is urgent to analyze the ethics of memory manipulation before such techniques have been fully developed and implemented. In this commentary, I want to expand on the notion of authenticity and the question of which dimensions of personality really matter for authenticity.

The authors define the self as an integrative framework of personality, which is why they use a concept of authenticity which relates to all three levels of personality they distinguish (dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and self-defining life narratives). However, we should not be too quick to equate the self with personality. In doing so, the question of why all dimensions of personality should be relevant for authenticity has been neglected. Marya Schechtman and other narrative self theorists (e.g., Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, or Paul Ricoeur) argue that the self is narrative because selves are fundamentally agents which requires narrativity. (Schechtman 2011) For actions to be intelligible and meaningful they need to be integrated into a narrative. Through the narrative, actions are integrated into a causal and temporal order of short- and long-term intentions and beliefs as well as into a cultural and social framework. (MacIntyre 1984) This context of intentions, beliefs, personal history, and institutional settings is necessary for us to be intelligible to ourselves and to others and to ascribe meaning and significance to our actions. Thereby, narrative self theorists do not deny that there may be other dimensions to our personality, such as the ones suggested in the target article. But what matters for selfhood is agency and what matters for agency is the self-narrative. Similarly, we may ask what matters for authenticity. I argue that with respect to authenticity, the process of change matters over the content, which is why authenticity hinges on narrative identity. It is through the self-narrative that we account for processes and provide the necessary context.

To adequately evaluate the impact of MMTs (or other neural interventions) on authenticity, we should not focus solely on *which aspects* of a persons' personality change (e.g., values or dispositions), but

on *how* the change is brought about.¹ It seems that even a radical and sudden change of central aspects of the self can be authentic in some cases. For instance, if it occurred after a transformative experience, such as having a child. A person that acquires new values or goals after becoming a parent should not be deemed inauthentic. If this is true, what I will call a *process view* of authenticity is more plausible than a *conservation view*. This is a novel distinction within the spectrum of received views on authenticity. According to a conservation view, a person is authentic if a certain set of characteristics (e.g., their core values) remains unchanged. The *content* of the change is what counts. Different conservation views differ on what characteristics should be preserved (e.g., values or long-lasting traits), on the metaphysical status of those characteristics (e.g., whether they are a person's essence), and on when and how they develop (e.g., innate or after childhood). An essentialist account of authenticity is an example of a conservation view. Process views, on the other hand, judge authenticity based on properties of the *process* or the form of change (e.g., whether it is intelligible, promotes self-knowledge, or results from a free choice). As long as the way in which a person changes is authentic, he can change any aspect of his personality without becoming less authentic. What is deemed an authentic process of change differs between various process views. According to existentialist authenticity, a change is authentic if it is directed by free choice. A different process view, which is also widespread nowadays, holds that authentic changes need to occur "naturally". In this view, a person is authentic if she changes because she matures or makes new experiences without it being feigned or socially conditioned.

A third option would be a combination of a process and a conservation view. As I understand it, this is what Pugh, Maslen, and Savulescu (Pugh, Maslen, and Savulescu 2017) propose. According to their account, to assess the authenticity of change we should look first into which aspects of the personality have changed. If a relevant part of their personality (i.e., long-standing, coherent values) has changed we should consider how the change occurred (i.e., was it an intelligible and rational change?). However, this omits the possibility that certain processes could threaten authenticity no matter their outcome regarding personality-changes.² It seems that a person who has been manipulated into doing something or holding a belief would still be less authentic even if no long-standing, coherent values are affected or undermined. Another example would be a person who suppresses or ignores parts of who he is (e.g., her sexual orientation or his negative feelings towards someone) to uphold his long-standing, coherent values. A process view can explain what is inauthentic in those cases. Whether and which aspects of one's personality change may influence how severe the impact on authenticity is but it is not decisive for the question whether the change was authentic in the first place. On this view, the very fact

¹ This distinction focuses on the authenticity of change, in contrast to, for example, the authenticity of an overall life, a person, or a single action. The observations on the authenticity of change should however be transferable to other areas. Whether the way a person changes is authentic is particularly relevant for neuroethics since neural interventions usually aim for changing patients or may change them in unintended ways.

² The parallel counterexample against a pure process view, that certain personality changes could threaten authenticity no matter the process, seems implausible given the example above that even changes of one's most central values could be authentic in the right circumstances, such as after a transformative experience.

that MMTs bring about change by means of intentional manipulation of memories may turn them into a threat to authenticity, no matter which aspects of personality change.

If the process of change is decisive for authenticity, the context of how it occurred is important. In particular, the motives and intentions of the involved individuals matter as well as the causal pathway—in other words, the narrative it is situated in. Through the self-narrative, we contextualize the episodes of our lives and connect them to our past and future through intentional and causal ascriptions. Self-narratives can account for the process of change. In parallel with the argument for a narrative self, we can conclude that what matters for authenticity is the process of change and what matters for the process of change is the self-narrative. I agree with Zawadzki and Adamczyk that there are other dimensions to our personality, but the one authenticity ultimately hinges on is our narrative identity. A narrative account of authenticity is thus no less empirically informed than the one suggested in the target article since it does not contradict constructs used in contemporary psychology. The disagreement is on the conceptual level of how we should conceive authenticity and which of those psychological constructs count for authenticity.

The remaining question is: what are compelling criteria for an authentic process of change? The concept of authenticity is very broad and combines ideas and norms of diverse traditions. Depending on which aspects are considered as most central to the ideal of authenticity, for example, truthfulness, self-knowledge, self-determination, or a combination of those, different criteria may be postulated. It seems plausible that striving for the complex ideal of “being oneself” entails following not one but a multitude of norms. The ambivalence and many-sidedness of authenticity should feed into possible accounts of this ideal. Elsewhere, I make an attempt to provide such an account. (Leuenberger 2020) I suggest that to be authentic a person needs to have and act in accordance with a self-narrative which is *sustainable*, meaning it accurately, intelligibly, and coherently represents one’s lived experiences, and which depicts a *well-defined* person. Thus, the question we should ask to evaluate the impact of memory modification on authenticity is not whether it can change a persons’ values, since value changes can occur authentically, but whether the modification of memories can lead to a less sustainable and well-defined self-narrative.

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