

# Experience

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## FULL ARTICLE

### Introduction

In the philosophy of history, as in philosophy in general, the concept “experience” has a dual connotation, which is best grasped by the German concepts *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. While both can be translated as experience, *Erlebnis* refers to personal affective relations to the past and is often translated as “lived experience,” as it comes from the verb *erleben*—living through something. It is important to notice that an *Erlebnis* in terms of an experience of having lived through something has a passive connotation and has no implied knowledge claim, and it retains the suggestion of immediacy even when referring to an *Erlebnis* in the past. This is different with *Erfahrung*, the original German translation of the Latin *experientia*, which can be translated to English as “trial” or “experiment” and connotes both active engagement and knowledge. An *Erfahrung* is an individual or collective experience that has been cognitively processed as experiential knowledge. Although it can be argued that *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* are intrinsically connected, as an immediate *Erlebnis* may be turned into a reflexive, judgmental *Erfahrung*, the conceptual distinction is helpful to disentangle the various ways in which experience is used in the philosophy of history.

In the philosophy of history, “experience” has mainly been used in discussions surrounding two issues—defined by the twofold meaning of the adjective “historical” in “historical experience”: *res gestae* and as *historia rerum gestarum*. Historical experience can refer to experiences in the past or to experiences of the past. In the first instance, experience is an object of historical inquiry that comprises the collectively processed and transmitted experiences of a society. In the second instance, historical experience is used in reference to epistemological, and sometimes ontological, contexts as a specific mode of apprehending the past. Although it would seem straightforward to align the first use of historical experience with *Erfahrung*, and the second with *Erlebnis*, the relationship between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* is complex and the tensions between both concepts highlight various positions taken in both discussions.

### The Concept over Time

The rise of experience as a historiographic concept is closely intertwined with the rise of modern historical consciousness in the late eighteenth century. In a landmark essay, Reinhart Koselleck (2004) argued that the acceleration of history and the rise of a progressive understanding of temporality at the turn of the nineteenth century caused a rift between the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation” of Western societies. Contrary to premodern times, when the dictum *historia magistra vitae* treated past experiences as

exempla for the present and future, in modern times the experience of previous generations was historicized as belonging to a past that is fundamentally different from the present. The historicization of human experience was at the same time a foundational prerequisite for the rise of modern historiography, as well as a central epistemological problem to the philosophy of history, because if past experience is essentially different from present experience, how is it attainable for contemporary historians? Or phrased differently: how can present, subjective, experiences of the historian contribute to understanding past experience as an object of inquiry?

In the tradition of German Idealism, experience (Erfahrung)—per Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) (1999)—relates to sensation-based judgments of objects in empirical reality. His innovation was that human reason is actively involved in producing experience, that the possibility of experience relies on necessary a priori conditions, such as space and time, which structure haphazard sense inputs and enable experience. As an effect, experience is concerned with the phenomenal world of appearances, not things in themselves. Building on Kant, G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) defines experience as the constitutive element of consciousness in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Because he sees the historical process as the growing self-consciousness of an abstract notion of Spirit, experience becomes central to history.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) challenged the Kantian notion of experience by stating that, although experiences of the natural world are phenomenal, the world of lived experience (Erlebnis) is not. He contends that the contents of lived experience are gradually acquired over time (Dilthey 1958). Erlebnis was a neologism at the time, specifically used to distinguish from Erfahrung, which had the connotation of sense perception generally associated with the natural sciences. Dilthey aimed to move beyond that latter notion of experience to provide the humanities—and particularly the historical sciences—with an epistemological basis of its own. The “acquired psychic nexus” built through Erlebnisse is historically embedded in society and thereby more accessible to us than nature. He subsequently defined lived experience to be the object of study of the human sciences, contrary to the natural sciences, which are oriented toward Erfahrung. Historical understanding, then, relies on the possibility to reconstruct the inner experiences that lay at the root of the historical expressions or objectifications (Ausdrücke) which make up the historical source material, using the historian’s own acquired psychic nexus.

In the interwar period experience also became a topic of philosophical reflection in the British philosophy of history, mainly through the work of Michael Oakeshott (1901–1990) and R.G. Collingwood (1889–1943). Building on the German Idealist tradition, in *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) Oakeshott identifies history as one of three main modes of understanding. Experience, he states, “stands for the concrete whole which analysis divides into ‘experiencing’ and ‘what is experienced’.” He thereby claims that the distinction between experience and what is experienced in a meaningless abstraction. Rather, Oakeshott understands experience as a totality of human experience, which he equates along Idealist lines with the totality of human thought. From that rather Hegelian logic there is no “outside” to experience. History then—as the mode of experience subject to the postulate of pastness—is not concerned with the “totality” of human experience, but it is a highly selective abstraction of what was real. This abstraction is subsequently often mistaken for the totality of events. After all, historians write about specific subject matters and at the same time assume they are writing “History.” In this sense the historical past is not the same as the constantly changing whole or totality of experiences.

In *The Idea of History* (1946) Collingwood provides a more pragmatic theory of historical understanding that defines history as the “re-enactment of past experience.” Acknowledging the impossibility of attaining past sensations or immediate consciousness, Collingwood (1946: 294) stresses that “thought” should be treated as an element in experience, which opens the possibility for the historian to “re-enact” past experience or “re-think” the thoughts of historical actors in the present. As there is no way to attain original thoughts and experiences, the historian creates a mental simulation of the past in the present using available knowledge of the historical circumstances in which historical actors operated. The ability to re-enact the thoughts and experiences that led to certain actions in the past then provides an understanding of and explanation for these actions. A main weakness of this theory is, as with Dilthey, the denial of the historicity of experience, as the theory relies on the assumption of a structural similarity of past and present experiences.

It was Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) who challenged this ahistorical treatment of experience in theories of historical understanding. While he mainly directed this criticism toward Dilthey and Romantic hermeneutics, he also challenged the Hegelian conception of experience for assuming an inevitable finitude of historical experience by identifying experience with self-consciousness. The answer he presented in his *Truth and Method* (2013) concerned a twofold historicization: the historicization of experience as historical effect—a body of experiential and interpretive knowledge that expands, reshapes, and to which layers of interpretation are added over time—and the historicization of the interpreter of history, as the historian understanding that he is bound to a specific culturally and historically determined position that he cannot overcome, but must utilize when understanding the past. Understanding is then recast as self-understanding, not in a Hegelian sense but in the sense that the interpreter engages discursively with texts and traditions of interpretation to establish a “fusion of horizons” between the world of the text and his own interpretive horizon. This does not imply some form of synchronization of past and present experience, but through the engagement with the text the interpreter deepens out his assumptions and pre-understanding, which subsequently can produce a better understanding of one’s own historically determined position in the stream of interpretation.

## Interpretations

Over the last decades, experience has been central to two discussions in historiography and historical theory. Both discussions reassess the concept of experience in the wake of the linguistic turn. The first discussion concerns issues of historical objectivity and provides a poststructural critique of experience. In this discussion experience is related to history in terms of *res gestae*; it concerns the question to what extent a historiographic focus on experiences of historical actors as the subject of historical inquiry implies historical essentialism. The second discussion uses experience in reference to *historia rerum gestarum* and discusses how historical experiences of an individual in a given present can function as a means of apprehending or understanding the past. This discussion advocates a reappraisal of historical experience to move beyond the poststructural emphasis on language in questions of historical understanding.

The first discussion was born out of the increased focus that was put on experiences of historical actors as an object of study by historians since the 1960s. In this era, social—and later cultural—historians increasingly advocated a “history from below” (Thompson 1966) that

should study the experiences of ordinary people to move beyond the traditional historiographical focus on politics. Eventually it evolved into an attempt to move beyond structuralism and structural explanations (Ireland 2005). The History Workshop group in the United Kingdom, the Annales School in France, and Alltagsgeschichte in Germany all directed attention toward the lived experiences of people in the past in “a quest to recapture the subjective experiences of everyday life in the past at a regional, local, or even individual level” (Evans 1987: 763). With this development experience unwittingly moved to the center of historiographical practice as its key concept (Jay 1989: 36) even though the concept was not systematically theorized.

This subsequently raised questions about the epistemological assumptions that underpinned this notion of experience. Fundamental criticism came from Joan W. Scott (1991), who states that the use of experience as authoritative evidence in writing histories of underrepresented and subaltern groups obfuscates the constructed nature of experience. Taking experience as an authentic source of individual and group identity assumes a unitary subject prior to its discursive construction. This would imply essentialist reasoning, especially when such a subject is believed to be the bearer of an experience that historians try to recover. Widening the argument, Scott claims that a similar danger of essentialism underpins the idea that shared experiences constitute the ultimate ground of cultural difference, as such assumptions fail to take account of the processes and power dynamics involved in the constitution of subjectivity in the first place.

Although Scott did not propose a solution, her overtly poststructuralist claims about experience have been challenged. John H. Zammito (2019) defends a postpositivist notion of objectivity. He contends that a critical study of experience as a social and linguistic construct does not imply that experiences cannot provide evidence about the past or insights about the present. Rather, he aims at a hermeneutic-historicist interpretation of experience that allows for the “historicization of the historical subject,” but that at the same time allows for a dialogical quest to seek commonality of critical appraisal among historians. Despite interventions such as Zammito’s, the discussion has not been solved in a conclusive fashion. According to Paul Roth (2007) the discussion has stalled. The poststructuralist idea that experience cannot count as evidence implies that what then can count as evidence is the result of theorizing—which makes it impossible for experience to function as a basis for assessing the theories under question. As no alternative to experience, or an alternative way of dealing with experience as a source of historiographic inquiry, has been proposed, there is little incentive for historians to change their practices, which in turn may lead to a growing divergence between historiography and theory.

Although there is surprisingly little cross-pollination between this first and the second discussion, the second discussion can be seen as an attempt to reappraise the concept of experience to move beyond the focus on language and constructivism in poststructuralist thought. This discussion rose since the mid-1990s and casts the narrativist philosophy of history as its main antagonist. Interestingly the discussion has been instigated by Frank Ankersmit, a prime contributor to the narrativist philosophy of history together with Hayden White. Ankersmit (2005) does not aim to challenge claims about narrative representation being the core of historiographic practice but amends them by theorizing what comes before historical representation, that is, historical experience. Building on Johan Huizinga’s (1959) notion “historical sensation,” which captures the experience of being immersed in the past, a momentary state in which the past does not yet appear as an object to consciousness,

Ankersmit claims that historical distance and the objectiveness of the past are only established post hoc. He even speaks of “sublime” historical experiences when the experience (which may also be a collective one in this instance) concerns not a remote past, but a part of history still assumed to be part of contemporary reality. In such instances the experience effectuates a realization of an epochal break, the (traumatic) realization that a part of the present unequivocally belongs to the past.

Ankersmit’s project received quite some traction but does not stand alone. Other approaches with similar aims, but different conceptualizations, have been proposed. For example, by David Carr (2014), who—in a similar attempt to move beyond paradigms of memory and representation—leverages the concept of experience from a phenomenological perspective, based on Husserl and Heidegger. Others, like Ranajit Guha (2012), deconstruct the idea of immediate personal experience as a core element of historiographic understanding and narration as specifically Western. Different historiographic traditions, such as the oral tradition he reconstructs from the Sanskrit epic Mahābhārata, are neither personal nor immediate and leave little room for something like “direct experience” as they rely on processes of collective, repetitive, recounting.

## Conclusion

Experience often features in the theory of history. Yet, many times the meaning of the concept is taken for granted, and connotations vary from immediate lived experience (*Erlebnis*) to experiential knowledge (*Erfahrung*). While some contend the impossibility of writing a metahistory of experience because “there is as much a crisis of the word ‘experience’ as there is of what it purports to signify” (Jay 2005: 2), generally, experience features in two discussions in historical theory. The first treats experience as an object of inquiry. Here, historical experience refers to the experiences of historical actors. Although the study of such historical experiences appeared as a promising mode of doing history from the 1960s onward, questions have been raised about the constructed nature of such historical experiences and about the danger of essentialism. This in turn incited responses that questioned constructivism as a meaningful framework for interpreting experience. The second discussion concerns historical experiences of historians and the role they play in historical understanding. While a topic covered by earlier hermeneutic thinkers, more recent attempts to move the philosophy of history beyond its focus on narrative representation resulted in theorizing historical experiences of individuals and collectives as precognitive experiences of immediacy, which can eventually result in the experience that the past is definitely gone and as such can constitute the separation of past and present.

## Related Articles

See also: Epistemology, Historical Analogies, *Historia magistra vitae*, R.G. Collingwood, G.W.F. Hegel, Johan Huizinga, Historicity, Hermeneutics, Objectivity, Joan Wallach Scott, Narrative, Representation

## Further Reading and Online Resources

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