

Chichele Essay 2008

Memory by Paul Merchant

We live in an age where, in one sense, memory is quantifiable and ever expanding, measured in thousands and millions of bytes. Needless to say, such a concept would have seemed ridiculous to the people of the not very distant past. As human beings are, in general, less reliable than computers, so our variant of memory is far more subjective, flawed, and subtle than that of an average Dell PC. For as long as our species has existed, our capacity to remember has had multiple levels and worrying gaps, and it has defied comprehension even as we confer a similar capability to inanimate objects. Memory therefore links us by its very nature to our own past. As our world has changed, it has remained constant. Yet although we cannot overcome its flaws, the fact that short-term memory loss is such a debilitating condition reminds us that we have evolved needing this ability to tell us, quite simply, who we are, what we've done, and perhaps to advise us as to where we might go next.

This crucial importance has long been recognised. Recent understanding of degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's and senile dementia has placed a particular accent over the need to 'exercise' our memory, if only on a basic level. This in turn has in part contributed to the current fashion for 'brain training' video games. However, the ability to recall faces, facts or objects accurately has been valued for a long time. The ancient Greeks had a goddess of memory, and there are many voices today which lament the loss of learning by rote, or the diminishing number of people who can recite poems by heart. Interestingly, the expression 'by heart' itself seems to place the act of remembering at the centre of our existence. Drawing from my own memory, when I was part of my local Cub Scout group, we played a game involving remembering covered objects.

Given that we use this faculty to such a great extent to orientate ourselves in the world, it is tempting to see it as one of the abilities which set us apart from other animals. However, it is clear that animals such as dogs or cats have a capacity for memory or recognition (though whether they are conscious of this is another matter). It is indeed our consciousness, our ability to sort and sift through memories and to sometimes be aware of doing so, which, we think, marks us out. As a child, my mother had a dog which was able to remember how to play a particular game with her grandfather even after not seeing him for years. We would like to think that it did not consciously encounter this memory, but that it acted on instinct.

Assuming that this is true (and there is no sure way of knowing), our particular blend of memory and consciousness is part of what makes us human. However, as the novelist Sebastian Faulks has made clear, in his works 'Human Traces' and 'Engleby', this combination is far from perfect. Perhaps, most strikingly, the eponymous narrator of 'Engleby' is unable for psychological reasons to remember the murders he has committed. For the majority of the novel, the reader therefore inhabits the same incomplete reality as the afflicted narrator. 'Engleby' is only a recent, explicit example of a problem which can be found everywhere where there are human beings. The unreliability and falsification of memory has been a staple of practically every detective

story from Poirot to Prime Suspect. If our memory can be imagined as a library or an archive, then it is one arranged at random, where books can disappear without warning. Examples of 'artificial memory', such as children who grew up convinced that their nannies' stories of attempted abduction were their own memories, further complicate matters. In fact, one could end up with a rather depressing picture of a jumbled and frail human mind.

Here there is a paradox. Though our system of memory is imperfect, we are stuck with it. Moreover, it tells us who we are. Those on the nurture side of the nature-nurture debate would argue that a human's collected experiences, whether they are consciously or subconsciously remembered, make up his or her personality. Novelists and film directors alike have certainly made great use of the 'flashback' for character exposition. In cinema, these scenes are often presented in a hazy or unstable visual style, as if to indicate the unreality of memory. However, in 'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind', memories are quite literally inhabited by characters, and are made poignantly real before being erased. For me, the film effectively captures the reality and importance of memory in the formation of character. The fact that a large percentage of paedophiles were themselves sexually abused as children is a sober indicator of this. For those who favour nature as the determining factor, it is perhaps possible to see chromosomes inherited from parents as a kind of 'genetic memory'. Throughout a person's life, their body and perhaps their actions will always contain a reminder of mum and dad – this could be a comforting or an irritating fact.

An exploration of memory might seem incomplete without a look at forgetting. The act of losing lived experiences seems terrifying at first glance, and has propelled many people to record such experiences on paper, or on computers (which have more reliable memories). However, it seems unjustified to me to view forgetting as a wholly negative process, or indeed as the antithesis to memory. In fact, if we were not capable of letting go of some experiences, it is likely that our brains would not be able to cope with the sheer weight of life. Moreover, some people would suggest that much of what we think we lose in fact remains in our subconscious, perhaps to re-emerge later.

This seems plausible – I have often remembered something I once knew 'by accident', as if it had popped back out from a hidden corner of my brain. In that sense, our memory probably deserves more credit than we give it when we curse ourselves for forgetting an important date or anniversary. In fact, for all its failings, quirks, or flaws, it has been good enough to get the human race this far. We are still in the evolutionary race, and although our ability to remember is not as perfect as that of a computer, this is not necessarily a bad thing. By making mistakes, our memory gives us individuality. Its flaws might also make us more human, at least if you believe the proverb which says so.