Memory and Introspection
Maria Sauvageau
North Dakota State University

“Great is the power of memory, a fearful thing…a deep and boundless manifoldness; and this thing is the mind, and this I am myself”.

This is a statement made by St. Augustine within his *Confessions*. It is a statement based upon an introspective analysis of memory, but it also works well to explain the viewpoint of introspection: as he states; “…this thing is the mind, and this I am myself”. What is meant by this is introspection is a process of self-examination. It is an analysis which observes the phenomenon of the human being from the viewpoint of one who is the phenomenon. The roots of psychology can be traced back to this introspective analysis. As psychology has developed into a formal science though, these practices have been dropped in favor of the psychological experiment and practices which depend upon psychological measurement.

Harry Helson, in his book entitled *Contemporary Approaches to Psychology* states: “It is realized that in an objective psychology terms derive their meaning from relationships involving antecedent conditions and discriminatory responses or from relationships involving abstract mathematical concepts”. This means that within the guidelines of objective psychology, ideas regarding particular aspects of the human being can only be considered valid if one can create a hypothesis which can be tested in a controlled manner, much in the same way one performs a physics or chemistry experiment. This dependence upon “abstract mathematical concepts” is the reason though, why psychology

---

cannot elaborate fully on the reality of many human experiences, especially memory. It can never cross the boundaries which science ultimately, although rightfully creates.

The sciences have made great advances in the realm of medicine and production due to this ability to predict and dissect the world. It is this ability though, which creates restrictions towards other forms of knowledge. Science simply cannot account for everything, and it is through this sole dependence on objective science that persons focus themselves toward a harmful end. It is an end which Emmanuel Mounier defines best as a trend “toward depersonalization”, which “…attacks life, reduces its urge, degrades species into the monotonous repetition of the typical, (and) makes discovery degenerate into automatism”\textsuperscript{4}. This occurs because scientific knowledge has a tendency to fold in on itself. In an attempt to over-objectify the world, a person often times simply creates a separation and a fissure between herself and the world, or in the case of memory, simply a separation from herself.

In order to create a holistic view on the human being, and more specifically, the nature of memory-one may need to resign their position of a peripheral examiner. They must give up the urge to become a neutral sort of probe which seeks to grasp the meaning of man by seizing upon his exteriority. Rather, one must step back into his own body and therefore re-enter that innate relationship with the world and with others. Only in this way can one understand the immense influence which memory plays on their daily undertakings. One must take the understanding of a memory and remove it from its categorizations, and judge it rather by the memory as it is seen from within the context of a personal being. Even David Klein ends his nearly 900 page book entitled A History of Scientific Psychology with the statement: “…it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that the progress of psychology

would be helped, and the level of its theoretical discussions raised, if psychologists were philosophically more knowable than they usually are…”.

With all of this in consideration, it seems only reasonable to ask for recourse to the primal act of introspection which has long been abandoned. The next few thoughts will be an attempt to do just this. Through means of introspection, memory will be considered in relation to one’s daily undertakings, then more particularly to the physical senses, and from there the relationship between memory and the emotions will be examined.

One’s daily undertakings would become ever-renewing trials of comprehension without the aid of memory. The present is constantly intertwined with experiences of one’s past. Particulars form and fade in order to create one’s understanding of essences. It is memory in this broadest measure which plays a fundamental role within the daily life of the human being. The act of perception itself requires far more than simply an astute attention to sensed experience. It is an act, whether intentional or not, of understanding, sorting, and recognizing. Man would have no world without an ability to organize and relate the things, events, and internal workings he is surrounded and filled with. Man’s knowledge of the world depends first and foremost upon direct experience, but this direct experience would likewise not be interpretable if he were lacking the ability to remember. For example, location and orientation would be an ongoing perplexity were it not for the ability of one’s memory to relate oneself to their surroundings. As one passes from street to street in a familiar neighborhood, they hold glimpses and notions of what is before and behind them. Like a constantly unfolding map, these mental pictures act as one’s guide.

---

For these reasons, it is clear how the past must constantly answer to the present, it must continually inform and supplement pure phenomenon.

This dependence on memory occurs because the understanding of one’s present situation is never an experience of pure phenomenalism. Phenomenalism is a viewpoint which believes all understanding of physical objects can be reduced to an understanding of physical sensations.⁷ For example, a cat beneath one’s palm may feel soft and warm. One may even sense the slight static created while brushing a hand through its fine, dense coat of fur. The cat may purr, and its body may smell slightly of dirt and earth. These physical attributes alone though, cannot suffice to give full meaning to the experience. One’s memory of this particular cat, and of cats in general-whether favorable or not, cannot help but bleed out and absorb into the experience, until the memories become unavoidably intertwined within the tangle of fur and fingers. It is this entangling of a memory within the present which lends oneself a sense of comfortable familiarity or of apprehensive uncertainty.

It can be seen then how memory contributes to present experiences, shaping them and giving them meaning and value. Conversely though, one depends upon the present experience often in order to evoke memories from the past. How the world presents itself at the moment of recollection is instrumental-without something within the present to act as an instigator, giving the memory back, one would lose access to a whole realm of personal history. How often does one become almost surprised by the places, things, or even their own sensations, as they return memories which he or she could have never retrieved on their own? Simply rummage through an old box of trinkets or photos—it is almost as if those memories were held within the things, and not in the mind at all. Also, 

---
these memories given back to man by external happenings are not intentionally retrieved, but rather, they are pressed upon him whether he wills it or not. Henri Bergson explains this duality of memory and experience when he states “…a memory…only becomes actual by borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips. These two acts, perception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other, are always exchanging something of their substance as by a process of endosmosis.” 8 One uses memory to understand the present, but likewise the present can also act as a surrogate in order to give life back to one’s memories.

It is important to acknowledge the memories which are given back, and set upon man from an external source because this is often times how simple sense experience delivers memories. It is interesting how a smell, a taste, or a sound can spark one’s memory. The information disclosed within these memories though can often times be very limited, and vague. In being this way though, they express more clearly a feature which is present within most memories. For example, the scent of one’s mother; it has a particular smell yes, flowery, a little rich, I think, but at the moment when one smells this, they do not think particularly of how it smells, rather how it smells immediately creates a connection to a feeling of affection, a feeling of the maternal warmth and joy which she inherently carries as her way of being. It is a smell, but it relates to much more than the immediate knowledge which is tangible within a smell. There are many examples one could speak of; the thick damp smell which forebodes a place as uninviting, the sound of footsteps on an old wood floor which immediately lends of sense

of childhood security, or even the bitter taste of a neglected cold coffee which tastes like overworked fatigue.

Why and how do these supplemental notions implant themselves within memory? Or rather, why instead of recalling all the particulars of the last time one smelled this, or tasted that, does one often simply remember an overall impression of what this or that event now means to them? St. Augustine begs a similar sort of question when he states “…how is it that when with joy I remember my past sorrow, the mind hath joy, the memory hath sorrow…” 9 For example, one may have enjoyed what they were doing at a specific moment, but after time their memory of this event is filled with sorrow, perhaps simply at having seen the outcome of those actions. In this way the memory is not simply re-experienced, but also re-evaluated. One has a way of assessing their memories, summarizing and relating them to who he or she is at the present The value of one’s world view lies so firmly within what is recognized as this disposition, or the sentimentality within the memory. 10

This disposition is created because one is constantly moderating their daily experiences. She is documenting events through her intentions toward things and situations. She acquires knowledge through affirmations and negations. Like a thematic summary of events, this attitude is a key feature within all memory. It is of the memory’s essence to “…survive only as a manner of being and with a certain degree of generality.” 11 Memory is not then, as people typically associate it to be, simply an act of re-living a past detail or experience. Rather these detailed experiences often jumble together over time, until all is left is a slight notion of the past. It is this notion, albeit a generalization, which slowly

---

clouds over all the particular details of a memory like a semi-transparent film. The power which a memory has to fall upon man and seduce him is due to this overall impact which the past event made upon him. Without this, man’s memory would simply work as a storehouse of information, an apathetic retrieval system which only suffices to fulfill his basic needs.

In order to understand why this generalization of a memory into a disposition is so important, one only needs to relate it to the emotion which this disposition reflects. One must only think only of the power of memory in which bears regret and guilt, or even the memories which speak to one’s desires and passions. One cannot truly despise or long for something they do not remember experiencing. It is this understanding which brings St. Augustine to state: “Where then and when did I experience my happy life, that I should remember, and love, and long for it?”. These memories can be so overwhelming, even to the affect that they seem to tap at one’s insides. They can become so pestilent as to even cripple the human being to a state which hardly even resembles a rational creature. A single memory has the power to override prudence and to pull taut the strings of one’s emotions. Memory may be man’s first teacher, but it is also his most intimate antagonist. Memories suspend oneself in unfair assumptions and the insurmountable fear of stumbling over the same stones over and over. One’s memories tell man what to want and what not to want. In this light, St. Augustine was quite right in his simple statement “Great is the power of memory”.

Therefore, it is not fair to reduce memory simply to an abstract set of predictable reactions. It would be foolish to think the totality of a memory can be measured by a

---

psychological “fact”, or any other impersonal viewpoint which takes man and disassembles his actions in order to find something “concrete”. If anything, these conclusions are the opposite of “concrete”. They cannot understand the power or worth of even a single memory in relation to man’s daily existence. As a science, psychology can see the effects of the wear and tear which memories can have, but it cannot place a value on those memories. This is why one must not down-play the value of their remembrances, for we live in a world which is “…destitute because it lacks the unconcealedness of the nature of pain, death, and love.”\(^\text{13}\)

Although a painful memory may interrupt one’s calm and well being, it is this “unconcealing” which shapes man, molds man, and it is the affect of these memories which leads man to understand a bit more of what it means to be human.

Having now seen through introspection how memory relates to the human being in both a general and intimate sense, it may be valuable to ask how the memory of objective psychology fits into and relates to these ideas. Does the knowledge of objective psychology look to supplement and re-enforce the life of a human being, or does it rather seek to gain knowledge by simply disintegrating all of the mutable aspects of life? In man’s constant and ever-expanding quest for knowledge, it may be time to start asking what form of knowledge is the most important, and most relevant to the human being. For there is always more to know, but what is really \textit{worth} knowing?