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**The Limits of Memory: the question of memory and identity**

“I am the same me; the same essence of Yvette has continued. I am still the same sensitive person who yearns for the idea of a relationship, even though I want to be a super-bitch. I miss the affinity with a person I care about. I am still the same shy introvert that I was ten or fifteen years ago. I am still Yvette, still the same little girl I was when I was ten, and I have to consciously suppress it; the same person who likes to be pampered, likes to have her own way, who is still easily hurt by harsh words. I can put up a facade, but the essence of it all is me, the me that was there from the beginning, that developed through interaction, the additions have developed the core, some are survival mechanisms, they are extensions of the core, of me.”

This fragment of a telephone conversation (which I wrote down as she was speaking since I thought it would be excellent for my paper) serves to illustrate the ordinary notion of personal identity, a notion which we seem to come to unreflectively. Accordingly, personal identity is persisting, unitary, determinate and is distinct from our brains and bodies. It remains the same even though it responds to change and develops over time. It exists separately from temporary or *ad hoc* features and events and is determinative of who we are as unique selves. It is the “I” that has experiences, and has thoughts and emotions and the place from which we respond to and interpret the world. Thus to be a person is to be a unique entity that is not reducible to brain or physiological processes. Whether this notion of identity is fallacious or not, it underscores three

things: the importance of personal identity; the internal nature of personal identity; and the significance of memory in the apprehension of the self.

Personal identity refers not only to qualitative but also to numerical identity 'I am the same me, the same Yvette...' illustrates that the common conception of identity is that a person or self at time  $t1$  is numerically identical with a later person or self at time  $t2$ . Thus there are two dimensions to personal identity: the synchronic and the diachronic. These serve to illustrate the internalist perspective necessary to a sense of self.

This perspective is exemplified by my awareness that at this moment I am touching the keys of the keyboard as I type this paper, that my arm is hurting, that I can hear a neighbour's music, the whining of a dog, the chirping of the birds, and am feeling the gentle breeze coming in at the window. I am also aware that the music is Country and Western and that I hate it, that my dog is asleep in the next room and that I am nervous about my paper. Thus several perceptions, emotions, feelings, thoughts and ideas are seemingly available to the brain of a human being simultaneously at any one moment. However, I know the multiplicity of information being received and processed is happening to the same being and that this being is me. Somehow there is a unity of consciousness that enables me to understand that these experiences are mine. *I* am streaming and filtering this information.

Like Yvette, I am aware of a connectedness of experience between my past self and my present self. Thus, diachronically, I know that I am the same person who has continued over time. The synchronic and diachronic aspects of identity are inextricably linked. Synchronically, or at any

one time I am aware that I persist over time. This information is only available to me, since it is accessed from the 'inside'. No other person can, therefore, be me, unless they can have phenomenological access to my past and present. Identity is, therefore, a psychological property; and of all the psychological properties attributable to a human being, memory is the one that facilitates personal identity. Like Locke, I contend that memory is the necessary and sufficient condition that facilitates the sense of continuity that results in personal identity or the notion of a self. However, unlike Locke I see this process as entirely physical. The special consciousness made possible by memory is a function of the brain. Operating in tandem, both the long and short term experience memory are instrumental in creating a synchronic self. I am presently aware that I hate country and western music because I have done so for as long as I can remember; I believe my dog is in the next room because I saw him there a short time ago even though I cannot see him now. Like Yvette, I am convinced I am the same person because I have the same characteristics I remember having some time ago. I know I am the same person who visited Egypt because I remember my experiences there. I know I am the same person who submitted an abstract to participate in this conference because I remember doing so and intending to write this paper if I were accepted. Hence since personal identity is a result of psychological connectedness and furthermore, since the aspects that are believed to be constitutive of the self - my characteristics, my intentions, my beliefs, my ideas - are linked to memory, I submit that conscious memory is that in which personal identity consists.

Memory is not only essential to the unity of a consciousness, it is also, by extension, crucial to the formation of a collective identity. It is axiomatic that human beings inevitably acquire identities. Being a human animal is not itself an identity, but it does place limitations on the kind

of identities that can be acquired. One of these constraints is that the human animal is necessarily a social animal. The human animal becomes a self on entry into the social. The human animal is also an agent; s/he can interpret and act on the environment. There is, therefore, a mutual relationship between personal identity and the society in which it is acquired. How does this happen?

Culture and social organisation are universal and perennial. Human kind has always been endowed with culture: a shared style of expression in language and gestures, style of clothing, culinary arts and so on. It is a 'pattern of conduct transmitted through emulation ...culture is a perpetuated and sometimes transformed and manipulated, bank of acquired traits' (Gellner 1997:1). Culture, therefore, refers to pre-existing patterns of behaviour and roles, pre-existing ideas about the nature of reality, pre-existing history, pre-existing modes of expression - language, literature, music, myths and a multiplicity of customs and traditions. These provide the human animal with the resources to interpret the world and itself. We do so, at least initially, through the modes of understanding that the forms of social life into which we are inducted make available to us. As Ross Poole observes, '[t]he prevailing language and culture not only provide the conceptual resources through which we become aware of the world and others in the world, but the resources through which we become aware of ourselves as part of the world' (1999: 60). In this way we become conscious of ourselves as subjects of experiences and actions, thus acquiring identities. Thus the human animal is a social object, and like any other social object - money, a compliment, a university - we become selves by the way in which *we* are interpreted.

Thus we become selves by becoming subject to the social realm. From the foregoing it is clear that culture has more than one sense - it is the container of representational objects as well as a process of the continual manufacture of those objects. It, therefore, also refers to the way in which people acquire the knowledge to comprehend cultural artefacts and to recognize them as their own. Culture is *Bildung* - education or formation. The process through which a human animal is inscribed within a particular form of life.

I was once asked to describe who I thought I was in about three words - not my characteristics *per se*, but my identity. I said 'West Indian, Black, and woman'. These are all social identities. They all draw heavily on memory. To be West Indian is to draw on a national identity. Like all national identities, it relies on historical memory. The truth or invention of the memory is not always relevant as long as it is felt to be true. The historical memory of slavery binds the islands of the Caribbean into a quasi-nation. It is this historical memory that informs our many cultural practices - our music, literature, our sporting activities and our public symbols and iconography. Our West Indian anthem dedicated to our West Indian cricket team exemplifies the work of memory in collective identity: 'No noble thoughts brought us here to these islands/ but through it all we have risen above/ through our flanneled knights/ flashing their willow and leather/These keepers of the flame must feel our undying love'. The songwriter also refers to the 'Caribbean nation' as 'a sunbeam cutting through our clouded past' (David Rudder). Thus memory connects the past to the present and gives meaning to diverse events of the present that in turn binds diverse human animals into a people, a nation. We are at home in the social environment the nation provides. National identity is thus an aspect of self formation. The nation becomes part of the process by which individuals become aware of themselves as having an identity and as part

of a community. Thus, for example, the memory of Brian Lara breaking the world record for the highest score in an innings, or remembering that Jamaica played in the football world cup four years ago, the first time for a Caribbean nation, provides a moment of self-recognition. Through those proud memories I can confirm my individual existence and be conscious of myself as having a particular collective existence. It is through this knowledge of my self as a member of a collective that I carve a place for my self and a perspective from which to conceptualise and respond to the world. National identity is thus a way of saying 'I'. Thus my personal identity, my sense of self cannot be separated from my national identity. The nation possesses the linguistic and cultural means necessary for the articulation of the sense of self for its members, thus becoming part of our psychic structure.

It is memory that facilitates this psychic integration of the external social environment and the internal. Our memories are formed in response to external prompting. The social context into which we are initiated provides the primary modes of understanding which our brains encounter, and so, its linguistic and cultural resources form the framework through which subjective experiences are distilled and comprehended. Thus the external is internalised and will influence what is significant in our memories; but memory, a cognitive capacity, is itself internal, thus personal. In this way, the interplay between subjective experiences and social identities is made possible through the interaction of experience-memory and historical memory.

The conversation with my friend demonstrated that the ordinary notion of personal identity is that it is something that persists through time, is unitary, determinate and is distinct from our brains and bodies. In other words, it is a further fact, a separately existing entity distinct from

our brains and bodies. This idea is epitomized by the conviction of the existence of Cartesian egos, or immaterial souls. However, physicalists can also hold this view. Our use of language seems to support this view. The pronouns, for example, 'I' and 'you', seem to presuppose the existence of persons; in fact, it is difficult to speak impersonally. The use of one seems to point to an anonymous person, but a person nevertheless. However, as many philosophers (such as Hume, Mackie, Parfit, Olson) have pointed out our ordinary notion of self or person is inconsistent. It is inconsistent precisely because memory, on which selfhood is predicated, is flawed and inconstant. As John Locke made clear, permanent forgetting can lead to the contradictory situation of one body and two persons. Forgetting results in discontinuities and can result, as Reid showed, in a situation where I am and at the same time am not the same person over time. To illustrate, a soldier can remember stealing apples from an orchard when he was a boy, thus the soldier and the boy are the same person. Later, when the soldier becomes a general he can recall the brave deed he performed as a soldier, but has lost the memory of the boy stealing the apples. Thus the general and the soldier are the same person, but not the general and the boy. This situation contravenes the logic of numerical identity. It is the consequence of any argument which holds that psychological connectedness is a criterion for personal identity. Later arguments, following Lockean lines, have attempted to correct this violation of logic, by positing the necessity of psychological continuity instead. This latter theory allows for overlapping memories to be a necessary criterion for personal identity. So that according to the revised version the general and the boy would be the same person, sort of, that is if we revise the meaning of same. On this view numerical identity is also lost and in its place identity becomes a matter of degree - the general and the boy are the same person in as much as there is an overlap of the general's memory with the soldier's memory.

The ordinary concept of person is thus problematic. It is not merely, as Mackie points out, that we accept as a person only something whose unity is clear cut and that we impose conformity to the standard logic of identity as a requirement, but that we believe there are things which cannot fail so to conform. But what right have we to believe this? A critical examination of the concept of person reveals that there is no basis for this belief. Since the concept of person is predicated on memory, it is inevitable that the sense of sameness of person must be fluid, thus contradicting the concept of personhood. In these circumstances, it is more logical to conclude that the self is an illusion, a fiction made possible by memory. For as new memories are formed and old ones lost, evanescent selves appear along the temporal continuum the memory supplies. The fact that I can remember Brian Lara scoring 365 runs to break the world record fosters the illusion that I was the same absolute person then as I am now. This is false. Remembering projects the appearance of unity of consciousness. As Hume pointed out, a person is just a train of perceptions held together by certain relations that entail memory.

There is a sound criticism of this idea. There are not just the perceptions. There has to be something which interacts with the physical objects that are perceived to store and retrieve information. In other words, there cannot be a self-less memory. The response to this objection is that there can be self-less memories. All that does the storing and retrieving is the brain and nervous system. Memory is a function of the brain, a function that is necessary for our physical survival. There is, therefore, no need to posit a further fact, a separate entity that does the perceiving, the storing and retrieval. On this view, personal identity can be deemed to be reducible to bodily continuity. However, this is so only in an indirect and contingent way. The

direct cause of the illusion of personal identity is the psychological connectedness caused by memory. There is no self that has persisted through time, that is quintessentially you.

It is possible, that there may be an executive capacity of the brain that is responsible for uniting our various experiences and intentions. This could then perhaps be interpreted as the further fact that some physicalists speak of. However, if there is such an executive capacity, we could not be aware of it, it must necessarily be beyond our consciousness. Hence it cannot correspond to our notions of the self, for this relies on conscious memory for its recognition by us as a unitary thing.

Derek Parfit has argued that the personal identity is not what matters. He argues that it is psychological connectedness and/or continuity, what he calls Relation R, that matters, and so contends in favour of a notion of survival that we ought to be concerned with instead of personal identity. He thinks we can re-describe a person's life as the history of a series of successive selves. He says, 'No phoenix has ever existed . But there are many series-persons. This sentence is being typed by a series- person, me. This person is named Derek Parfit. I the series-person, hereby name myself *Phoenix Parfit* ...We can claim that what matters is Relation R. This is what matters *for us, the series-persons*' (Parfit 1984: 291). I accept his re-description of persons, but disagree with Parfit that personal identity is not what matters on the ground of Thomas Nagel's proposal that it is psychologically impossible for us not to think in terms of identity even though it is illusory. As mentioned above, our human condition imposes limitations on the kinds of identity that are available to us. As human animals we have certain cognitive capacities that operate in ways designated by evolution. Part of the way memory

works is to project a feeling of the unity of consciousness we call self. Thus it would be psychologically impossible for us to abandon notions of selfhood. However, we do not have to believe that it is a metaphysical reality. We have the capacity for critical analysis of this 'self', consequently, we can understand that it is fictive. The best we can do is to remember this.

The question then arises as to the extent to which memory can be seen as 'real'. A distinction is required. The objects of memory are real. Unless scepticism is true, or the universe consists only of mental entities and events, Brian Lara really does exist and he really did break the world record. However, the content of my memory need not be accurate. My memory of what happened just before the record was broken, for instance, may be distorted for whatever reasons. I have had fever induced hallucinations which I can remember quite clearly, but the events never took place. Similarly, ethnic communities can have memories of common ancestry and of events that are only tenuously connected to what actually occurred. It seems clear then that the content of memory can not be considered real, genuine.

As we have seen, much of our culture and history depend on memory. As explicated above, cultural artefacts and historiography form the basis of individual and collective identities. These identities in turn provide us with a perspective on the world, and it is from these world views that the social is produced. Social here simply means a collective. Thus social facts or reality are phenomena involving a plurality of human agents whose actions are related. In the same way that the inconsistency of memory led to the rejection of the concept of the self, can social reality be impugned because the content of memory is unreliable? It seems to me that this must be the case. Given that the contents of memory are subject to creativity, and given the reliance of

social construction on the content of memory, social reality cannot be metaphysically grounded. It can have no basis in reality. Our self-evident truths, our beliefs about the past, our values and morals, our national identities have no basis in reality. This goes beyond the present trend of postmodern and post-structuralism. What is being posited is not the trifling point that humankind's ideas are transmuted into reality through action. The point is that social facts or reality is a product of human cognition. 'It is the very intellectual activity that is thought to generate facts' (Collins 1997: 3). Human thought, concepts and ideas, therefore, produce social reality in a non-causal way. In other words, social reality is constructed by human conceptualization. Much of our conceptualizations are connected to our memories. The reliability of the content of memory has been questioned, thus belief in a social reality seems highly suspect.

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