On the Undisturbed Functioning of Memory

Robin S. Brown

Abstract
Taking a short quotation from Jung as its cue, this paper is constituted as a series of reflections on the theme of memory. Exploring how the pursuit of "facts" might result in the sense of an imaginative decline, the author draws upon the thought of Rene Guenon, James Hillman, Michel Foucault, Daniel Stern, Martin Buber, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, and Frances Yates. It is argued that the role played by the internet in shaping the nature of self-representation might be considered diametrically opposed to psychotherapeutic process.

Keywords
History, identity, memory, narrative, technology

"Careful investigation shows how very much our conscious decisions depend on the undisturbed functioning of memory." (Jung, 1959, p. 5)

With the rise of social networking services, the self-policing of persons continues to intensify. The emergence of this phenomenon sees private life formalized as, through six degrees of separation, the human community submits to the carefully circumscribed dictates of a shared narrative. Meanwhile, the manner and extent to which our personal information is recorded has grown incomprehensible: global information systems are apparently of an order now, that any item of data once registered as such might, even when erased at its source, still be reconstructed from untold locations elsewhere in the system.

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When the ritualistic burning of the past is no longer possible, we might consider again the fear of soul-loss in respect of photography. Attending to the question of change under observation, there appear to be clear resonances with the therapeutic setting. Might this suggest a relationship to the widespread observation within psychoanalytic training institutes that patients who are made subject to control studies demonstrate a far greater likelihood of abruptly leaving treatment? In clinical work, the cautionary adage states: if it's not documented, it didn't happen. What then, of the inverse proposition? Perhaps growing concerns around the question of surveillance have a tendency to miss the point, at least in so far as the danger thus perceived is assumed merely to reside in the intentional misuse of data.

The metaphysician Rene Guenon describes a process nascent to the emergence of modernity that he terms the "solidification" of reality (Guenon, 2001, p. 115). Referencing Henri Bergson, who posits materiality as the domain of pure reason, Guenon argues that the world is locked into a state of materialistic decline wherein the scientific conception works its imaginal violence on the manifest (by making it more so) with oppressive efficiency. Apposite to the question of surveillance, he writes:

Much could be said about the prohibitions formulated in certain traditions against the taking of censuses otherwise than in exceptional cases, if it were to be stated that such operations, like all those of the 'civil state' as is it is called, have among other inconveniences that of contributing to the cutting down of the length of human life [...] but the statement would simply not be believed; nevertheless, in some countries the most ignorant peasants know very well, as a fact of ordinary experience, that if the animals are counted too often far more of them die than if they are not counted; but in the eyes of moderns who call themselves 'enlightened' such things cannot be anything but 'superstitions'. (Guenon, 2001, p.144)

The extent to which outside observation might constrain what's "possible," perhaps speaks to the necessity of the sealed therapeutic vessel. While, in times past, the magic circle was drawn to keep the spirits out, its role now is to keep them in. The question then: how far are we willing to take William James' proposition that reality is comprised of beliefs reinforced by habits of action? Consider, as James did, that the scientific method is founded on a belief in a shared and objective reality governed by natural laws that can be discovered by means of observation and experiment. Such concerns are central to the development of Jung's psychology. In his foreword to Richard Willhelm's translation of the I Ching, he writes:

We have not sufficiently taken into account as yet that we need the laboratory with its incisive restrictions in order to demonstrate the invariable validity of natural law. If we leave things to nature, we see a very different picture: every process is partially or totally interfered with by chance, so much so that under natural circumstances a
course of events absolutely conforming to specific laws is almost an exception. (1958, pp. 590-591)

We might wonder how to reconcile this dimension of Jung’s thinking with his insistence that he be taken seriously as a scientist. Perhaps the point, however, is precisely that such a conflict not be settled. There may be a self-protective dimension to this—a resistance to being placed historically perhaps recalling the fear of soul loss consequent upon the image fixing of the photographer’s camera. Virgil informs us that the dead were required to drink from the waters of the Lethe, since only by tasting of forgetfulness could they wholly submit to death and thus be born again. Closely related are the themes of blame and forgiveness. According to Judith Herman, recovery from trauma is ultimately dependent on giving up our sense of being special (1997, p. 235). Might our narcissistic age therefore also be characterized fundamentally by trauma? In the extent to which we find ourselves positioned as victims of history, our repetitive compulsions perhaps give rise to the sense of a fixed identity.

How might these ideas bear upon theories of the personality? Daniel Stern (1984), in expounding his widely influential model of human development, makes an interesting distinction between the observed infant and the clinical infant. The former is construed by developmental psychologists on the basis of behavior as exhibited by young children, while the latter is a psychoanalytic co-construction established jointly by therapist and adult patient. Stern is attracted to the creative freedom implied by working with an approach to therapy emphasizing the primacy of personal narrative (p. 15), but he moderates this view by suggesting that we should acknowledge that there are certain generalized developmental tendencies that can be discerned from working directly with the infant. In conducting his own observations, Stern videotaped very young children and exhaustively analyzed the recordings. With frame by frame attentiveness, he hoped to demarcate perceived commonalities and thus lay claim to the structurally fixed dimensions of identity formation. As though caught between the scientific worldview’s method of reality testing and a clear feeling for the primacy of narrative, Stern appears to recognize that the irreducibility of the subjective factor renders purportedly “objective” developmental schemas illegitimate (p. 17), yet this does not prevent him from devising his own. Where for Loewald (1974) psychopathology is perceived as being consequent upon a severance of the relationship between fantasy and reality, it remains to be asked in what extent the subject-object distinction reflected in Stern’s thinking and perhaps thrown into doubt by Jung’s synchronistic principle (Brown, 2014) might be considered detrimental to therapeutic process. Can the subject be circumscribed in the fashion Stern implies?

Foucault (1969) suggests that the concept of an “author” emerged as a response to the possibility for transgressive discourse and an attendant need to punish the perpetrator. The preference of the Middle Ages for anonymity in fictive writings versus named ownership for purportedly factual ones, is contrasted with a seeming reversal of this
trend taking place around the turn of the eighteenth century. The notion of the author is, in Foucault’s view, an ideological construct conceived so as to disempower the revolutionary force of fiction and to stem the proliferation of meaning. In the same paper, Foucault compares "discursive initiation" with "scientific founding." Discursive practices (among which he numbers psychoanalysis) are marked by self-evolving process-oriented qualities. Such practices are transformed by way of what Foucault terms a return to the origin. This origin is constituted in the work of the founder. By contrast, science is always bound to something thought to lie outside itself: “Reexamination of Galileo’s text may well change our understanding of the history of mechanics, but it will never be able to change mechanics itself. On the other hand, reexamining Freud’s texts modifies psychoanalysis itself” (Foucault, 1969, para. 35).

The self-contained, self-consuming, and fundamentally uroboric character of the discursive practices are in effect contrasted with what we might term the cannibalistic qualities of scientific discourse. Frazer (1912) describes how Maori warriors would taste the blood of their fallen opponent to assimilate the essence of their foe and protect against his avenging spirit (p. 156). In like fashion, the nature of Western progress assimilates the reified spirit of that which it conquers.

Consider the following position taken by Stern:

Evolution as it is daily encountered in the guise of "human nature" acts as a conservative force in these matters, so that changing our general views of who infants are can change who they will become only to a certain degree. (Stern, 1984, p. 276)

As though struggling in some respect for having conceded so much to scientific method, we encounter this passage at the close of Stern’s most influential work. Based on his direct experiences with the observed infant he concludes that individuals are constrained of necessity to a shared developmental schema, yet surely he moves beyond immediate experience in assuming that these shared tendencies are only subject to transformation in the course of evolution? The whole question of narrative potency rests precisely here, but in uncritically assuming the validity of a culturally prescribed narrative Stern has in effect already settled things. There is a basic assumption being made that the power of story is only effective in so far as it can shape subjective experience, and that an objective world beyond this remains unmoved. Stern does not appear to entertain the possibility that humanity might re-imagine itself en masse.

In attempting to predict the future, statisticians commonly call upon the methods of "regression analysis" in an effort to establish the relationship between variables. An approach of this kind starts from the basic assumption that the situation as circumscribed is final: for this reason, the possible existence of so-called "hidden" variables remains unaccounted for, as does the emergence of variables that were not previously a factor. In keeping with these assumptions, developmentalists like Stern assume that the systematic emergence of human consciousness can be treated as a static object of in-
quiry, since the emergence of new factors is thought to come about only by means of a change in the purportedly objective situation. Because the objective situation is imagined to rest upon our biology, and the common assumption continues to be that our biology evolves only at a tremendously slow rate, it is further assumed that the system as it stands can, for all practical purposes, be treated as closed. Stern's work with infant development is perhaps most valuable for the way in which he initially maps out the theoretical territory. His theoretical groundwork ultimately points to the fundamentally ungraspable nature of early life. Whether considering the observed infant or the clinical infant, we cannot avoid projecting our own "mature" assumptions. As Hillman (1972) puts it:

When we parade forth the child, the primitive, the animal, or the archaeological past—and, I would add, the patient—as observational basis for psychology in order to support a theory by grounding it in origins,' nowhere could we better reveal the archetypal fantasy of the theory we are in this manner justifying. (p. 243)

The early experience of the infant is as unknowable and at bottom mysterious as the origins of the universe itself; both phenomena possess a veiled quality which gives rise to the need of a creation mythology. These veiled origins are the guarantee of our necessarily metaphorical perceptions, and of the epistemic uncertainty which registers the possibility of change. Any question of a starting point must ultimately be addressed to the imagination. In Western society, these questions are typically framed in the causal logic of history. When we attempt to "explain" the past along the lines of causality, we act so as to project the will backwards in time. To look back in such a fashion is in a sense to treat events as though they've yet to be decided. This historicizing function of the will, whether directed to the past or future, can be encapsulated as a refusal to accept what is.

Exhortations to live in the now have become a cliché of pop psychology. In so far as some measure of wisdom can be ascribed to these words, it is to the extent that they suggest an intent to live with more presence. Unfortunately, in the hands of many therapists focusing on the now functions as a shorthand for a repression in service of social norms. In such cases "living in the now" is taken quite literally, and understood as though in distinction to living in the past or future. This appears nonsensical, since a preoccupation with such matters cannot be said to literally place a person outside of the present moment. Where a therapist encourages a client to move away from thoughts of the past or fantasies of the future, far from fostering an engagement with the present, in a sense what is actually striven for is quite the opposite: rather than accepting the present for what it is, the effect is to actively reject it and to try and supplant it with something deemed more "useful." In other words, by the very quality of its striving, the therapist's approach is by definition oriented towards a future of their own imagining, and in fact neglects the patient's present altogether.

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If transforming consciousness means translating the events of our lives into mythological language and thus softening the fixed image we have of ourselves, then a distinction might usefully be drawn between the temporal present and the timeless present. To live more fully in the temporal present is to live suspended in the tension between past and future, while to live more fully in the timeless, is to remain in the tension between time (the temporal present) and eternity. What this suggests, is a two-step process: the first step would entail becoming more conscious of personal experience, while the second would consist of relating this personal experience to the universal. These stages are clearly implied in Jung’s work; the first stage being correlated with the personal dimensions of the unconscious, and the second with the collective. Becoming more conscious in the temporal present transforms our experience of timelessness, allowing our experience of the temporal to in-turn be transformed by the eternal. Mircea Eliade writes:

In narrating a myth, we reactivate, as it were, the sacred time in which occurred the events of which we are speaking. [...] In a word, myth is supposed to take place in an intemporal time, if we may be pardoned the term, in a moment without duration, as certain mystics and philosophers conceive of eternity. This observation is important, for it follows that the narration of myths has profound consequences both for him who narrates and for them who listen. By the simple fact of a myth’s narration, profane time is--symbolically at least--abolished: narrator and audience are projected into a sacred, mythical time. (Eliade, 1951, p.173)

Consciousness of the temporal present is in a sense dependent on our attempting to escape it. Our awareness of the present is assured by maintaining a tension between past and future. The scientific method stands opposed to this. Much as we do in analysis, the scientist searches for patterns, yet for the scientist the underlying intent is to establish an essentialist basis to things that is globally coherent and endorsed by all. The question asked is always how rather than why, so that the intentionality of our experience is neglected and ultimately comes to seem absurd. The scientist is thus fundamentally concerned with the past, and with rendering that which has elapsed in the form of an absolute present. It is precisely by rendering a fixed history that this aim is realized. As Baudrillard (1994) writes: "such is the vital function of the model in a system of death, or rather of anticipated resurrection, that no longer gives the event of death a chance." (p.2) Rather than be made subject to changeful influences, science seeks the static confirmation of things as they are now assumed to be. Heidegger (2000) cites Plato’s Republic as the turning point in Western intellectual history, the juncture at which the verb to be is suppressed in preference for being as a noun. As the first instance in literature of the notion of a utopia, The Republic heralds a cultural movement that culminates in the process we have seen Guenon describe as "solidifying." This movement pertains to the severance of spirit and matter which so much concerns Jung, Corbin, and Hillman. The function of the imagination is repressed, severing and circumscribing at
the expense of relationship. Martin Buber, another figure greatly preoccupied with these issues, writes:

In the It-world causality holds unlimited sway. Every event that is either perceivable by the senses and "physical" or discovered or found in introspection and "psychological" is considered of necessity caused and a cause. [...] Only those who know relation and who know of the presence of the You have the capacity for decision. (Buber, 1996, p.100)

On the subject of cause and effect, Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj states:

Causality is in the mind only; memory gives the illusion of continuity and repetitiveness creates the idea of causality. When things repeatedly happen together, we tend to see a causal link between them. It creates a mental habit, but a habit is not a necessity. (Nisargadatta, 1973, p. 58)

In what degree might a person's capacity to relate and be related to in an I-You situation be impaired by others relating to that same person as an It? Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj's contention that a habit is not a necessity leaves much room for interpretation. If we follow Guenon, then the prevalence of it-ness that he terms the "reign of quantity" suggests the manifestation of an irreversible process of spiritual decline with immediate ramification not simply for our lived experience, but for the very nature of the cosmic order. For such a thinker, the social construction of reality is no mere play of impressions, but the immediate expression of a corresponding spiritual situation. Guenon's radical critique of modernity rejects the notion of progress as conventionally understood, suggesting that the emergence of this very notion is itself indicative of decline. If there is some question of breaking away from this process, then it entails re-imagining history through a return to origin. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj suggests that our mental habits are a function of the profane memory. In like fashion, Jean Gebser (1985) writes:

Memory is always time-bound; and what is even worse, it temporizes the timeless without transforming it into temporal freedom. The turn away from memory, on the other hand, is a turn toward freedom; the poetic emphasis shifts from the recollected past to the present. (p. 324)

In light of these reflections, certain aspects of post-colonial thinking can start to seem like a particularly advanced form of the cultural imperialism that this movement would seek to correct. Efforts to actively encorse plurality have about them precisely the quality of purportedly objective remembering that thinkers such as Guenon and Gebser would have us reject. The widespread concern for celebrating cultural diversity might start to seem like a self-defeating project. To take one example, the predilection of contemporary anthropology for validating the wisdom of marginalized peoples—in so far
as this project entails a process of documentation—inevitably culminates in the imaginal subjugation of the population in question. That certain indigenous peoples have themselves been aware of this danger is implied in the policy of not disclosing a key aspect of ritual when allowing Western scholars to catalog their practices. Giegerich (2007) has pointed to something similar in respect of wildlife conservancy: "it is precisely by way of the protection of nature that its ontological annihilation is taking place." (p. 28) In formalizing and inscribing the "beliefs" of an indigenous culture, Western inquiry effectively subjects the culture in question to the imaginal deadening that is attached to the scientific frame of reference. The "preservation of knowledge" inevitably entails the imaginal death of the culture under examination. This tendency is set in motion with the invention of writing and consequent erosion of the oral tradition, and comes to fruition with the rise of scientism and the emergence of mass-literacy.

Only by dissolving established narratives might something new emerge. Paul Miller (better known by his stage name, DJ Spooky) claims turntablism as the leading art form of the early 21st century. He speaks of a "eugenics of the imagination" (Miller, 1996) that operates by intentionally dislocating fragments of aural history so as to isolate them from the context of their original meaning. These fragments are then adopted as the building blocks by means of which new meaning is constructed:

In the electronic milieu that we all move in today, the DJ is a custodian of aural history. In the mix, creator and re-mixer are woven together in the syncretic space of the text of samples and other sonic material to create a seamless fabric of sound that in a strange way mirrors the modern macrocosm of cyberspace where different voices and visions constantly collide and cross fertilize one another. (Miller, 1996, para. 14)

In an effort to awaken from Joyce's nightmare, Miller seeks to emancipate himself from the strictures of a prescribed history by assuming the stance of a participant. In keeping with his role as a DJ, Miller embraces technology, perceiving the World Wide Web as in some respects analogous to turntablism, since both point to new ways of organizing information. Might the seeming fluidity with which we navigate the internet point to the possibility of dissolving pre-given narratives? Although intriguing, such a notion is vulnerable to obvious criticism in so far as the relational metaphors frequently applied to “the web” seem not to be reflected in the present consumer-driven reality. By inviting the intimate participation of its audience, the manner in which the online experience shapes and informs subjectivity might render Twentieth Century questions of the manufacture of consent appear tame by comparison.

In her survey of the Renaissance art of memory, Frances Yates describes how the Renaissance magus adopted the method of loci developed in the classical world. Roman orators used this method to memorize speeches by associating the things they had to say with locations in an imagined building; thus, when retracing their steps through the quadrant XLVI
building, they were able to recall the structure of their speech. Personalities like Marsilio Ficino, Raymond Lull, and Giordano Bruno, took this mnemonic device and adapted it to occult purposes. By developing hugely complex cosmological schemas that were in part derived from the astrological zodiac (and hence animated in time), these figures attempted to map their own experience onto the imaginal apparatus. In this way they hoped to restructure consciousness, bringing it into alignment with the archetypal situation reflected in the heavens. Yates writes:

By imprinting on memory the images of the 'superior agents', we shall know the things below from above; the lower things will arrange themselves in memory once we have arranged there the images of the higher things, which contain the reality of the lower things in a higher form, a form nearer to ultimate reality. (1966, p. 216)

Perhaps the prescribed structures of social networking websites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Myspace suggest a profane analog to the Renaissance palaces of memory, with the transformative aspiration of the magus having been subverted so as to preserve the status quo. If the extent to which this phenomenon has come to occupy a central role in social relations implies widespread alienation, then the need for community is expressing itself in patterns of behavior that serve only to reinforce it. Anchored in the archetypal dynamisms of the objective psyche, memory might serve as a conduit to transformation, but grounding our lives in the present technology we are left only with the carefully circumscribed display of our so-called "personal" information, registered now as anything but.

In the absence of a striving to be historical on the individual's own terms, subjectivity is surrendered. If the efficacy of the will is to be realized, then a person's motives will reflect a situatedness in their own history. In this way, the dictates of the archetypal dominants can be more readily related to, thus engendering a sense of creative freedom. In the absence of a pure motive there can be no faith, and the effectiveness of the will is correspondingly weakened. One way of thinking about therapy is as a process by means of which a person's will is brought into conformity with their faith. Where the problems of the will have yet to be resolved, we find ourselves living in bad faith. The will becomes effective as the challenges of the personal realm are extricated from the demands of a history not of our own making. As Jung puts it:

In the last analysis, the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately spring as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers. We make our own epoch. (1964, p. 149)
References


