



“In Search of Memory”

Some Reflections & Possible Avenues of Philosophical Exploration

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF MEMORY?

- Memory enables us to solve the problems we confront in everyday life by marshaling several factors at once – which is vital to problem solving.
- Memory is the glue that binds our mental lives together. It provides our lives with continuity and gives us a coherent picture of the past that puts current experiences into perspective.
- ***Without the binding force of memory, experience would be splintered into as many fragments as there are moments in life.***
- Without the mental time travel provided by memory, we would have no awareness of our personal history, no way of remembering the joys that serve as the luminous milestones of our life.
- ***We are who we are because of what we learn & remember. Memory is the essential feature of our mental life; without it we would be nothing.***

Some Things to Consider/Explore

- (1) Why might a life lived/experienced in fragments be harmful? What about compartmentalizing? Is this a form of fragmentation? Is there not value in compartmentalizing (even if only temporarily valuable)?

- (2) What implications does the statement “we are who we are because of what we learn & remember” have for individuals who experience issues with learning/acquiring knowledge, issues with memory loss, other? What kind of things can be said societally about this, as well?

VISITING ORIGINS (PARIS & VIENNA)

- When you remember something, you use different clues to store it & recall it. The better it is encoded, the easier it is to recall. ***If you encode the space, as well as the objects in the space, then it is easier to recall. We often recall something specifically because of space.***

Some Things to Consider/ Explore

- (1) Why do you think a “sense of space and place” is so important to memory? Is it possible that, that there is more than functionality components in play (e.g., might our “sense of self” be intimately related with our “sense of space and place”)?

MOUSE STUDIES

- ***Memory maps are stable only when an animal pays attention (i.e., attention & memory are intimately related).***

- There are a lot of questions out there. Questions that you choose have to do with who you are & where you come from...it’s a matter of personality. You bring your own personal history & personal interests to the questions you ask.

Some Things to Consider/ Explore

- (1) What about when we experience things “in the background”... that we are not necessarily paying attention to. Does that not work its way into our memory?

- (2) If the questions we ask are a matter of personality, what if our personality sucks? Does it follow that all good question askers have good personalities or interesting personal histories and interests?

FATHER'S TOY SHOP

- ***“You and I are having a conversation & we are influencing each other by modifying the structure of our brain*** by remembering something. This has enormous ramifications. If you think of psychotherapy, that you are creating an environment in which people’s behavior can change, you might be doing this by producing anatomical changes. And, in fact, ***people have found that when you practice something, when you relive an experience, anatomical changes occur in the brain.***”

Some Things to Consider/ Explore

- (1) This seems to give further credence to the claim that conversation/dialogue matters as a matter of personal growth. Are there any possible extrapolations one can think of relative to this that might speak to the social nature of human animals and the significance of language? For example, what if conversations did not have any impact whatsoever on the structure of our brain?
- (2) Is there a difference between *remembering* something and *reliving* something? For example, is someone who is struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) just remembering something painful or reliving it?

NEW YORK HAMPTON SYNAGOGUE/LONG ISLAND

- Kandel discusses his interest in European history (while in grad school) & wanting to understand how cultivated, intelligent people could listen to Heidegger, Mozart & Beethoven one day and kill Jews the next. Ernst Kris (an Austrian psychotherapist)

said to him: ***“You want to understand motivation, you want to understand what drives people, you’ve got to understand the human mind.”***

Some Things to Consider/Explore

- (1) Outside of the obvious reductive translation of Kris’ claim (if you want to understand motivation and what drives people, you have to understand the human mind), what are some other examples of how this might be interpreted? Are there other factors to consider when thinking about why and how cultivated, intelligent people do terrible things?

VIENNA (HELDENPLATZ)

- Kandel recounts his experience of feeling abandoned by friends when Nazi atrocities were taking place. ***“As you move through life and experience different things, you acquire information about the world. And that becomes permanently encoded in your nervous system.”***
- ***“One theme of post-Holocaust has been ‘never-forget’ – an exhortation for further generations to be vigilant against anti-Semitism, racism & hatred...the mindset that allowed Nazi atrocities to occur. My scientific work investigates the biological basis of that motto – the processes in the brain that enable us to remember.”***

Some Things to Consider/Explore

- (1) If what we acquire about the world (via experience and information) is permanently encoded in our nervous systems, in what sorts of ways might these manifest (e.g., anxiety, depression, fear)? And, assuming one wants to change what’s encoded, are new experiences and new information enough?
- (1) What implications might Kandel’s statement have about the biological basis of the motto “never forget” have on the debate about monuments? Might removing statues/monuments be akin to removing history...and possibly memory about such history?

BULGARIAN RESEARCHER (GROWTH FACTOR)

- Kandel discusses the discovery by a Bulgarian researcher on his team of an indirect growth factor in *Aplysia* snails (a type of sea slug). The researcher describes the discovery. ***“It was a very happy day of my life. We were looking at sequences...what you do is you send out what your data is and get back sequences and then read it. And when I read and then I looked, I immediately realized that this looks like the one. The one I’ve been looking for so long. It’s very much like falling in love.*** We’d been looking for a partner. This partner would not respond. So I even began looking for others because there were other growth factors we knew existed but were not quite what we were looking for. But then it came...in the last moment...when we were about to give up & look for another project. So it was very dramatic...yes!”

Some Things to Consider/Explore

- (1) The Bulgarian researcher’s description of discovering the growth factor being like falling in love is analogous to a discussion by Socrates (via Diotima) about the love of ideas, wisdom, and truth in Plato’s *Symposium*. Have you ever thought of discovery in this way? And might there be value in thinking of love in such a way? Does love “as discovery” add value to how we might conceive of love with our partners? And, if so, how might this impact our behavior and appreciation of our relationships with others?

PASSOVER

- Kandel’s daughter reads about the importance of asking questions for the Jewish & for scientists. Isidor Isaac Rabi, the Nobel laureate in physics, was once asked why he became a scientist instead of a doctor or lawyer or business person. And he described how his mother made him a scientist without intending it. ***“Every other mother in Jewish Brooklyn would ask her child after school, ‘Now did you learn anything today?’ Not my mother. She always asked me a different question, ‘Izzy,’ she’s say, ‘Did you ask a good question today?’ That was the difference.*** Asking good questions is what made me become a scientist.

Some Things to Consider/Explore

- (1) If promoting intellectual curiosity is important, and the art of good questions is a component of that, what sorts of things can we do to facilitate this (at home, in our schools, and our communities)? What sorts of things might get in the way of this?