

Zach McMillan

Professor Judith Greenberg

Truth or Fiction: Memory and Storytelling

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### Subjective Memory and the Formation of Self

Western science, for the most part, has presented memory through the distinctly dichotomized view of object and subject. Thus, research has been founded on the necessary distinction between the real world and the human interpretation of this world. Or, more precisely, two equally real yet completely different worlds exist: the objective universe, nature, and the subjective experience of this universe, the mind. This seemingly clear and tangible distinction often goes unquestioned. Fundamentally, though the name may change from the "soul" to the "self" to the "conscious", there is something that separates a living human from the world in which it exists. However, it is precisely at the point when this distinction appears true that one should ask: why should it be so?

Exploring the phenomenon of memory reveals the startling idea that the human tendency to separate mind and nature is, at best, built upon a shaky foundation. It is memory, not the soul, that creates, for each human, a narrative of self. This narrative, based as it is in a completely unique collection of experience, is the faculty responsible for the most sacred part of humanity, the part that is so absolutely necessary to conscious life that it is most often taken for granted: personal identity.

Only fifty years ago the British philosopher and logician Bertrand Russell wrote, "Matter is less material and the mind less spiritual than is generally supposed. The habitual separation of physics and psychology, mind and matter is metaphysically

indefensible" (Russell 107). Russell's words evoke a question that resides in the pulse of all human life: what does it mean to understand the conscious?

This single question has multitudes of answers. The answers cover such a vast scope of thinking that, it would seem, any definitive response would necessarily be the result of gross generalization, or the opposite: too specific and missing crucial points. Usually, however, the answers unite within the general definition that consciousness is the human perception, interpretation, and understanding of reality (Carrithers; Conway).

Where did these ideas begin? Are we, as humans, born with this tacit understanding of the way the world works? The answer is, in fact, a resounding no. This definition of consciousness can be traced back to some of the most famous western scientific and mathematical minds, like Aristotle, Plato, Pythagoras, and Descartes. This view of consciousness has become so engrained in today's culture that modern mathematicians begin to solve problems with it as an unquestioned basic assumption.

Alongside Bertrand Russell, Kurt Gödel is considered the most important and influential logician of the twentieth century. Gödel, like his philosophical/mathematical predecessors, assumes that reality exists outside of human consciousness. Specifically with Pythagoras and Gödel, the idea is that mathematical objects do not depend on observers (Clawson 247). This idea, often referred to as idealism or Platonism, assumes that mathematical objects existed before humans and will exist after humans. In other words, mathematical objects collectively represent a reality that is not dependant on human beings. The underlying message is the universe is "there" even if a human mind is not there to perceive it. The world possesses an objective facet, as the universe always has.

After the mathematical establishment of objective reality one can see logically how it leads to an explanation of the development of the subjective aspect, our consciousness: elements of this (implicitly) non-conscious universe came together in a way that allowed subjective experience to arise. Although there is no explanation of how this happened, the basic point is: *Somehow it did*. This is the common Western view of reality. When you ask someone to explain consciousness, they will almost certainly use this view as a framework for their answer. The question is how, exactly, does the separation of the mind and the rest of the world affect the modern human conception of the self?

The split between subjective and objective reality has defined modern humanity by two crucial aspects. The first is personal identity. The physicist and astronomer David Darling writes,

You may not look or even think much like you did when you were five years old, yet in spite of this you believe that, in a deep, underlying sense, something about you – your identity – has remained uncompromised (Darling 49).

This notion of personal identity seems absurdly obvious, but only because it is such a widely held belief in today's society. But is personal identity really a fact? Is a person the same at thirty as he or she was at the age of five? Indeed, is a person the same when he or she "acts" differently? Is a normally calm person the same person when suddenly he or she turns into a raging monster behind the wheel of a car?

Fundamentally, it seems, personal identity is inextricably linked to the second crucial aspect of modern humanity: continuity. At a most basic level, one's personal

identity is based in the continuous existence of one's body. The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead explored the phenomenon of continuity by explaining the seamlessly steady development of the body and appearance from birth to death. Chronologically, it is possible to look back on photographs of oneself and notice a steady and logical physical progression, yet this progression becomes logical only when it is seen through the continuity of one's mental life; through awareness, and thus, through the brain. In this way, the feeling of possessing a personal identity arises from the remarkable ability to mentally construct a narrative of self. The faculty of the brain responsible for this construction is memory.

Almost every action a person takes, and every thought a person thinks, is based on what his or her specific brain remembers has happened to it in the past. This can be applied to the future as well. Everything a person thinks and does will, in effect, reinforce the patterns of behavior and consciousness associated with being a developed, specific, and unique self. As Luis Buñuel wrote, "You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realize that memory is what makes our lives" (Quoted by Sacks 22). Buñuel gets to the center of the issue: for humans, every new experience and perception, from one second to the next, is necessarily interpreted in the context of one's basic sense of self. Memory unites the past with the present and offers a way to judge potential action in the future.

It seems clear that one must have a memory to have an identity. Memory itself, however, is not complete, static or even accurate.

In fact, a virtual consensus now exists among memory researchers that memory is a dynamic medium of experience shaped by expectancies,

needs and beliefs, imbued with emotion, and enriched by the inherently human capacity for narrative creation (McConkey ix).

The self does not exist outside of a real world context. The self, or rather the narrative of self, is dependent upon its environment and its specific place in time and space.

Memories are, as a rule, a construction or, perhaps more accurately, a reconstruction of past events in the present, whether the remembrances are of mundane daily activities or of anomalous, life altering events (McConkey ix).

The key point here is that for memories to exist they must be created in the present. This demonstrates the subtle subjectivity of memory and the self. Explicitly said, there is not “self” to experience life and to “have” or “possess” memories. This is the objective and separate idea of self. The self is actually constantly created through memory and is dependent upon the body experiencing life and the brain processing and retaining these experiences.

When the body stops experiencing, or the brain stops processing and retaining the body’s experiences, the self in relation to the present time is unable to exist. In other words, without new memories the mind cannot create an identity that changes *with* time and space. The self will literally be stuck in the past and constantly faced with irreparable paradoxes and inconsistencies.

This specific subjectivity of self is best understood through clinical examples of memory loss. The prolific writer and renowned neurologist Oliver Sacks provides such a case in his essay “The Lost Mariner.” Sacks writes about a hospitalized man, whom he refers to as Jimmie G, and who suffers from a debilitating case of Korsakov’s syndrome:

an inability to form new memories. Sacks first met Jimmie in 1975. Jimmie was forty-nine years old but no memory of anything that had happened to him for the previous thirty years.

Jimmie's self ended where his memories did. For him, World War II was just over. It was 1945 and he was a nineteen-year-old boy working in the U.S. Navy. At one point, Sacks gives Jimmie a mirror and asks him to describe what he sees:

He suddenly turned ashen and gripped the sides of the chair. 'Jesus Christ,' he whispered. 'Christ, what's going on? What's happened to me? Is this a nightmare? Am I crazy (Sacks 24)?'

Sacks quickly tried to calm and distract Jimmie, and he left the room. Two minutes later Sacks returned. He found that Jimmie was calmly gazing out the window, enjoying the pleasant spring day. Jimmie had no recollection of the doctor either. For Jimmie, it was as if nothing ever happened. Without the memory his self did not change from the event. It was still 1945 and he was still young and working in the navy.

For Jimmie, the lack of memory was not the lack of self. Jimmie understood his own personal identity, and it was an identity specific to him. He understood the difference between himself and the doctor, Oliver Sacks. However, the lack of thirty years of memory created a gap in the continuity of Jimmie G. Subjectively, Jimmie did not feel this gap, but this was, itself, the problem. Jimmie experienced no discontinuity, but he was constantly faced with a world that did not make sense. He was faced with a time and place that constantly clashed against everything he knew about himself.

For Jimmie, as for all humans, the self is created through subjective experience and retention of experience in the mind. The subjective self hopefully, but not

necessarily, conforms to the objective reality of time and place. As with an Alzheimer's patient, the destruction of memory is the destruction of the self. Thus,

Such conditions graphically expose the importance of our memories, insubstantial things that they are, in binding us together and helping maintain the impression that we exist as coherent, enduring selves...

Personal identity – the one thing we want so desperately to believe is real – is no more than a masterful sleight of the brain. And modern neurology fully concurs (Darling 49).

The human memory is a delicate thing. Its failure can produce irreparable damage to one's life, but so too can its perfection. As the opposite of Jimmie, one might imagine that a completely accurate photographic memory would be the most desirable type of mind, but usually this type of memory is a handicap as well – and sometimes it is a paralyzing neurological disorder.

In his short story, "Funes, His Memory," Jorge Luis Borges wrote about a man who literally never forgot any detail of his life:

With one quick look, you and I perceive three wineglasses on a table; Funes perceived every grape that had been pressed into the wine and all the stalks and tendrils of its vineyard. He knew by heart the forms of the southern clouds at dawn on 30 April 1882, and could compare them in his memory with the mottled streaks on a book in Spanish binding he had seen once and with the outlines of the foam raised by an oar in the Rio Negro the night before the Quebracho uprising (Borges 135).

This might seem like a fantastic gift, but the young man of Borges' story is, in fact, crippled. He is unable to really think for, as Borges writes, "To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract" (Borges 137). It does not make sense to Funes that a dog facing one direction should be referred to by the same noun, "dog," when it moves its head slightly, thus looking completely different. The complete details of life are far too complex for the human mind to interpret all of them.

The neurologist A.R. Luria documented a real case of "perfect memory" in his book, The Mind of a Mnemonist. Luria's subject was a Russian man named Sherashevsky who could not forget anything. No detail escaped his mind. Like the young man in Borges tale, he remembered every visual impression he had seen, every taste, every color, every texture he had encountered in his life. He even remembered every way of seeing and analyzing a situation. He became, for all real purposes, paralyzed. It was impossible for Sherashevsky to discriminate between *anything*. He could not focus on anything specific – any specific problem – because as soon as he did, his memory put forth millions and millions of irrelevancies. He could not complete basic chains of reasoning and thus, he could not make any decisions for himself. He found it impossible to become interested in one subject over any other, in one topic of conversation or another. Luria noticed that Sherashevsky spent most of his days alone, miserable and depressed.

Clinical cases like Luria's and philosophy like Borges' argue against the common, purely objective conception of memory. Often, when people describe memory, they use a spatial metaphor (Conway; Squire). The most common spatial metaphor compares memory to a great library:

Individual memories are the volumes on the shelves and an index helps a user (a rememberer) locate sought-for volumes (memories). When a book (memory) is located then it can be taken down from its shelf and read (remembering) (Conway 2).

Memories that are actually like libraries are not conducive to happy survival. Normal memory is selective and patchy and sometimes false (Darling). Remarkably, though, it never seems this way to its owner.

The brain inherently, every second, decides what is important and what is irrelevant:

Having organized itself, during childhood, around a particular worldview, the brain tends to consolidate mainly those memories that appear to fit in with and enhance this system of belief. Normal memory, then, is heavily biased toward a particular conception of reality. It is gappy, but good in parts, and may be exceptionally good with regard to some specific life episodes (Darling 41).

It is in this way that the specific human experience of being a distinct person is dependent upon a unique chain of experiences that connects the moments of each individual's life – and which, through memory, is carried into the present.

Memory means much more than the library metaphor can convey because memory is far greater than just information stored in one's head. Memory provides the most important contribution to personal identity and to personal continuity: two crucial aspects of the human self. Every day the physical and mental self is thrown into a fast-paced, changing world. The self consistently encounters new situations attached to new

sensations, and the healthy self miraculously survives, at the end of the day, feeling like the same person.

Perhaps this is evolutionary survival at its most basic. To survive, biologically, precisely means to stay the same, for, as the biologist Lewis Thomas notes, if you change at all you become someone else, a new individual (Thomas 37). The brain is driven to feel unified and consistent. The mind must create a narrative of self because the self must be continuous. So, to the question of why – why should the unique human self exist – comes the answer: no one, yet, knows. Undoubtedly, people will continue to search for an answer. Hopefully, as researchers, philosophers, scientists, writers and thinkers push forward they will explore the “self” through the human subjective experience and recollection of the world.

The self may be an illusion, but it is an illusion that exists and persists against enormous adversity in this world. At the same time, it is only because of this world that the self *can* exist and persist. It is no longer possible to separate between the real world and the human interpretation of this world. Both exist simultaneous and entwined. The wild idea appears that understanding one’s place in the world starts with oneself. The mind and the universe are dependent and inseparable. Questioning the self arises from questioning one’s personal identity. To begin an answer, one should start from the same place, and recognize that it is the only possible place to answer from.

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