

Memory Loss And The Elusive Self

I have no fear of death, but I am deathly frightened of losing my mind and memory. The idea of being trapped in a stranger's body, lost, adrift in thought and time is more than I can bear. Friends have laughed at my fear; they have countered with glib remarks: "At least you wouldn't know you are in that condition. You would be so far gone in memory loss that you wouldn't know your body is deteriorating. If you have no understanding of the nightmare, how can you be suffering?"

True enough. However, I am uneasy about such glib assumptions. The question nags at me still: is there any way the unconscious or subconscious body can know of its misplaced self? Can someone with dementia or Alzheimer's have an unconscious or subconscious awareness that his memory, his identity or sense of self has been lost in the shuffle?

So far, I have not come across in my readings a single suggestion that such possibility exists. There is a great deal of literature about unconscious or procedural memory which does not seem to have any relationship at all with an explicit sense of self. We have a vast reservoir of unconscious memories. Our body's motor functions--getting up, going to the bathroom, walking, sleeping--are all made possible by unconscious or procedural memory--the memory of procedures and actions we need to do to sustain ourselves as living organisms. We do not have to remember to breathe because breathing is an unconscious process embedded in our cells. In this sense, there is no memory loss possible with unconscious memory unless the area of the brain that controls a specific action is damaged.

In a very real sense, we are made possible by procedural memory. There are everyday activities that we do which do not require reflection. Driving a car is a good example of implicit procedural memory. This sequence of action is so ingrained in our cells that the driving itself becomes automatic. These memories have been sandblasted into our limbic system. That's why we never forget how to ride a bike even if there is a forty year lapse between our last bike ride and now.

Does unconscious procedural memory have an awareness of self? Daniel Schacter of the University of Arizona took a 58 year old man suffering from Alzheimer's to the golf course. The man could still hold his club correctly, tee up in the right spot and hit very well. These procedures have not abandoned his memory. However, he could not remember that he had taken a shot and started teeing off repeatedly. He could not keep score. By evening, his memory loss was so acute he could not even remember the afternoon's events and even denied having played the game that day. His sense of an intact self going through the passage of the day is nonexistent. ("Memory's Ghost" Hiltz 183)

One thing we do know--without memory of events, there is no self. We could not know who we were, who we are or who we want to be. Film-maker Luis Brunuel once wrote, "without [memory], we are nothing....we can only wait for the final amnesia, the one that can erase an entire life, as it did my mother."

What we also know is that this sense of self is transient--it changes with our memories and despite the sense that there is something primordial and geological about memories, they are not indelible; they do fade and change over time. And in the same way, our subsequent sense of self flickers in and out of focus.

What all this means is that our sense of identity, sense of self is more a work of fiction than truth. It is not meant to be solid bedrock, more like sand on the bottom of the sea, re-composed repeatedly by currents and changing tides. Everything that we experience alters our brain in some form. A word, an event changes the circuitry of the brain. These are physical changes that make the idea of a fixed self very slippery.

If memories change, remembering is not retrieving an actual event from a vault; remembering is re-creating, re-writing the past in terms of the present. Wordsworth defines poetry as a "moment recollected in time"; and by doing so, he has made the present an inexorable part of the past. A remembering is an attempt to make sense of the past in the light of the present, or an attempt to make sense of the present in the light of the past. There can be no memory without at least a whiff of the self in the present. In its explicit and total erasure of events, time and place, memory loss from Alzheimer's eliminates all traces of self.

And so my question is laid to rest, at least for now. Should I shuffle into old age, demented and forgetful, I need not fear the agony experienced by the unfortunate victims of Bells' Palsy--a lucid mind trapped in a failing body, conscious all the way to the end of its present and former selves. There is, unfortunately here for these poor victims, no saving grace--like memory loss.

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