The Ethics of Memory

by Samuel Hux (January 2022)

I think about memory a great deal. I don't claim my thoughts are original or profound, only that they are mine and compelling to me or I would not be sitting at my PC right now. As a subject, *memory* falls into several categories which themselves do not fall into logical or sequential order. So I will dig then out casually as they occur to me. . . or should I say as I remember them?

Obviously it is natural for one to wonder what one's earliest memory was. By which of course I mean the earliest event in one's life that one can recall. Not the earliest *act* of memory itself, which is impossible to recall, although I find

this notion compelling. Maybe there is some proud and lying "rememberer" who might tell you, "I recall the day I was born, or soon afterward, thinking (although obviously unable to articulate it thus), 'Jeez, I just popped out of my mother's womb.'" As absurd as this obvious fiction is, it embodies an intriguing question: when in a human life does one cease living only in the immediate present and begin exercising one of the most important human faculties?

Elsewhere in some essay I have reflected on the earliest event I can recall. And I have tried to distinguish between one you actually remember as opposed to an event which has lodged in your mind because someone, some adult probably, later told you about it in sufficiently memorable detail. I've several of those. And if it's that case, you might not trust this false memory, let us call it, because it is too neatly detailed. Ironically, the scarcity of detail authenticates the true memory. Memories are like dreams: I have a memory of a seminar (I suppose I should call it) during which a participant recalled a dream in a narrative of such orderly and rational detail—almost Aristotelian in style—that my wife and I knew she was making it up.

But here goes: my earliest authentic recollection. I am four, maybe five. The family is vacationing at Nag's Head on the North Carolina Outer Banks. Of which I remember nothing but the following. I am wading with my father. I am unsettled by a roar, which must have been wind and waves; I ask my dad what that sound is. He lifts me up and says, "That's the war in Spain." Of this I am absolutely—money in the bank—sure, but for one detail. Maybe he said "Europe" rather than "Spain." An indication of a war in some distant place. But my memory says "in Spain," although I do not pretend I knew what Spain was then. By the way, when I recalled this to my father years later, he had no recollection of it, so I alone have this memory. It is starker to me than more important events, such as for instance my graduation from high school, which oddly

enough is a total blank for me. It must have happened because I was soon a freshman in college, before a year later joining the army, about which I have many memories!

Generally we have no problem recalling *big* events in our lives, although there is the occasional exception. I was recently "reminded" of a confrontation with someone which the reminder was sure contributed to a significant change in my life. I don't doubt the reminder and remember the change, but have no recollection of that someone or the confrontation. On the other hand, I often wonder why *small* events of little consequence are so often etched in our memory apparently permanently. I seem to remember mentioning the army in the previous paragraph.

I know I enlisted, I know I arrived with other volunteers at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where I did basic training. I know that before basic I like all was submitted to IQ tests before assignment, to Charlie Company in my case; but most of this is a remembered *haze* with only the rare starkly etched image: It is frightening as all hell to pull the plug of a hand-grenade and hold the damned thing a few counts before throwing. But what I can never forget is an insignificant sequence during my first few hours at Jackson. Almost immediately after arrival, I stand with penis exposed before a bleary-eyed medic who commands in bored tone "Peel it back," the venereal "Short Arm Inspection." After which I am sent to a barracks, not for sleep, but to be taught to bank a fire in the furnace, after which I am taken to a mess hall for a breakfast of powdered eggs, wondering what the hell are these things—all while still in civvies. Of course I know why I remember these insignificant moments: unofficial indoctrination, this aint your mama's house, you're in the army now.

But there are events and sometimes moods which are insignificant in themselves and further are not etched because of a significant physical or mental environment, so to speak,

such as “you’re in the army now.” I mean something remembered when there is no conceivable reason for memory to kick in. The trouble with exploring them, however, is that before exploration you have to narrate them—and they can be boring as all get out. Tell me why I have a stark memory of driving down a street in mid-town Manhattan and noticing a very attractive college-age male and female standing before the entrance to a hotel. I cannot forget it. Nor can I forget a barracks mate at Fort Benning, Georgia, who constantly scratched his balls (although not exposed) the way one might scratch one’s head in thought. I might mention a few more, but I think I have reached the limits of instructive boredom. But, on the famous and well-remembered other hand, we are lucky to be so bombarded with casual memories even if they are in themselves meaningless. What would life be like if we were capable only of remembering only truly significant and consequential things? What would it be like for us even to talk to one another? We might bore each other half to death if we could converse only about the significant and consequential.

Here’s a significant memory, although not an event exactly, but an experience. I remember first reading Oliver Sacks, in his *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,* the case-study essay “The Ancient Mariner.” Sacks is called on as a consultant by an institution on Staten Island. He enters a patient’s room; that of a Naval vet he calls “Jimmy,” about 70 years old, and engages him in idle conversation. After a minute or so Sacks abruptly with no explanation walks out. A very few minutes later he re-enters Jimmy’s room. Haven’t we met before? Not that I recall, Doc. Jimmy has an extreme kind of amnesia, the name of which I forget (speaking of failed memory!). He recalls nothing before three minutes ago—save somehow the knowledge that he was a sailor, maybe fifty years before. His life is a series of roughly three minute episodes, which you can’t call a sequence, since that word implies some narrative order. No, Jimmy’s life is one

un-developing present tense after another: no past, and of course no future either. Sacks holds a mirror before Jimmy's face: he's shocked (perhaps expecting to see a sailor boy), not an elderly man; but shortly thereafter the shock has disappeared. His body—it occurs to me—must "remember" to eat, urinate, defecate, and so on. But his mind, naturally, or unnaturally, I suppose, cannot really learn. We need a past to learn from, as we wish to improve, sustain, or avoid things in the future.

I would imagine that such a life, one long Present going nowhere as it comes from nowhere, would be hell on earth. But probably is not: no way to judge whether things are good with you or bad with you. But I—with a past and a hoped for future—find Jimmy's condition not only depressing but frightening, threatening. I would add "tragic"—but tragedy implies the human. It's a legitimate question to ask, no matter that it is also offensive: is Jimmy a human being? Biologically, yes of course. But culturally? What culture? Socially? What society? But in so far as Pity is or can be a form of Love, maybe it's possible to love Jimmy (and Sacks, it seems to me, comes close). . . but you can love a pet dog, a beautiful horse. I'm getting more depressed by the minute, as I was when I first read the essay. So against my better judgment, but conforming to my better character, I am going to say, Yes, human—my poor and pitiful fellow creature.

I doubt you have to have memory to have moods. And I recall that Sacks recalls that Jimmy sometimes has a peaceful *mood* (I don't remember that Sacks uses that word) when he is listening to music. Or maybe my memory is faulty: was it when he is sitting in a chapel? My library is unavailable to me as I write this piece; maybe it is when he's listening to music in a chapel. No matter. Traditional (!) music and a religious, spiritual atmosphere are so closely akin.

I am thinking of Jimmy not only because I'm an admirer of Oliver Sacks but because I taught in college for so long, and

had so many students who were almost—metaphorically at least—"Ancient Mariners," except that they were not afflicted by nature, but rather were self-afflicted. I exaggerate of course. Youth are generally not much concerned with the past; there are exceptions (so I confess) but an exception is just that, an exception. I should emend that sentence to read "Youth are generally now, now I say, not much concerned with the past." When I was an undergraduate I had three "majors," not officially but in effect: English, Philosophy, and History. The largest faculties were in the English and History departments to cope with the students majoring or minoring or just choosing electives. That has changed radically, the change accelerated beginning in the radical 60s and 70s when students inebriated with "relevance" were "into the Now." But they would not have succeeded in revolutionizing the curriculum without faculty assistance. I feel no guilt about that myself, since I lost practically every curriculum battle I ever fought; nor did the victors feel any guilt for the damage they did. In any case, by the time I retired just a few years ago, and for 20-30 years before that, students were as ignorant of the past as I was at six years of age. And if (or rather since) these are the leaders of the future, the collective Memory is diseased. By the time I retired I honored the memory of dozens of students inebriated with the life of the mind, but for most students I felt only pity, but not the pity related to love, but the pity which was not really pity at all. . . but contempt.

Most of us will remember the classic justification for the collective memory whether we've actually read George Santayana's *The Life of Reason* or not: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." But there's another less practical justification, *The Ethics of Memory* I call it, having thought I invented its name until I read it elsewhere by someone who I am sure never read me. We are morally obligated to remember not only the Past in general or in its specific moments, but those people—in general and in

specificity—who made what we now call The Past. "Let us now praise famous men," said Sirach in the *Apocrypha.* Who *are* we if we in the English speaking world have no or little collective memory of our famous forebears, to say little of those who created Western Civilization itself? We are a collective disgrace, that's what. But Sirach's quotation above is incomplete, for he adds "and our fathers that begat us," which requires some elaboration.

Only an arrogant member of the "with-it-try" (Joseph Epstein's wonderful invention) would retroactively lecture Sirach on not having written "Let us now praise famous men *and women*, and our fathers *and mothers* who begat us." Of course we should honor our parents. . . and remember them when they are no longer here. One of the saddest elements of the Jimmy story is that such is no possibility for him. But "our fathers who begat us" means not only our parents. It is clear in context that the poet means "those who are not famous"—and consequently most in need of remembrance; and it is clear he means both when they are with us and when they are dead.

"In need"? What dead person needs anything, one might ask. To which I would answer, with no real logic at all, "All!" No real logic, but nonetheless. . . .

Who wants to die with this thought? *No one will ever remember me*. Death is horrible enough for the only animal we are certain knows it will die. But oblivion? Certainly there is some solace in the expectation that oblivion is not our fate. I dare say that is one reason—not the exclusive reason—but one reason for religious hope, the expectation, and for some the certainty, that the Elysian Fields await us. There is no way to know how many people really believe that an afterlife, a heaven of whatever kind imaginable, is a metaphysical reality. Records of church or synagogue attendance are no kind of evidence of what the worshippers believe in their souls, or what the *attendees* believe, for one may attend for reasons of cultural habit just as much as for actual piety.

But whether the traditional type of afterlife is a reality to all of us or not, there is one certainty that is relevant here: the faculty for all of us who are not Jimmy, Memory. In Memory lies the only certain approximation of an "afterlife" even if it's necessarily curtailed temporally unlike "life everlasting." Who's going to be remembered forever? Like. . . . name you own favorite famous person from the deep past. Most of us will be lucky (although we will not know it) to be remembered a generation, or possibly more. It's the hope that John Keats is supposed to have announced on his death-bed, "I will be among the English poets," after he supposedly said, "Here lies one whose name is writ in water." In any case, we who wish to be remembered have no moral right not to extend to others what we wish or will wish for ourselves. *The Ethics of Memory*.

A dozen or so years ago my spouse and I attended a lecture at an academic conference by a prominent psychologist which I found superficial, intellectually offensive, and boring (insults to the discipline of Freud and William James!). One of his contentions was that although it is proper to mourn the death of a loved one, if the mourning—that is to say the *active* remembering—lasts more than a modest time, the mourning is a psychological sickness. It is good that I cannot remember his name.

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