

Remembrance, Recollection, Reminiscence

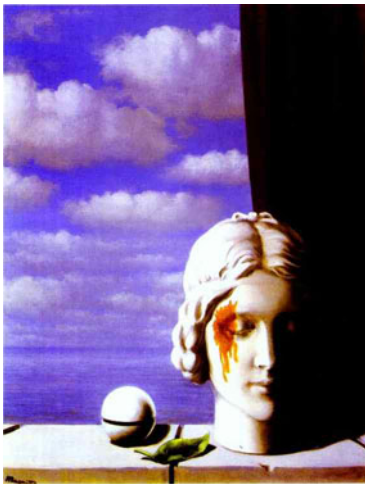
Ενθύμησις, Αναπόλησις, Ανάμνησις

Memory is not a certain repository of impressions, but a power of the soul exciting itself in such a way as to possess that which it had not.

Memory is summarily, *stability of knowledge*; just as immortality is stability of life, and eternity is stability of being.

— Plotinus¹

What is memory according to Theosophical Teaching?



ENQUIRER. The most difficult thing for you to do, will be to explain and give reasonable grounds for such a belief. No Theosophist has ever yet succeeded in bringing forward a single valid proof to shake my scepticism. First of all, you have against this theory of re-incarnation, the fact that no single man has yet been found to remember that he has lived, least of all who he was, during his previous life.

THEOSOPHIST. Your argument, I see, tends to the same old objection; the loss of memory in each of us of our previous incarnation. You think it invalidates our doctrine? My answer is that it does not, and that at any rate

such an objection cannot be final.

ENQUIRER. I would like to hear your arguments.

THEOSOPHIST. They are short and few. Yet when you take into consideration (a) the utter inability of the best modern psychologists to explain to the world the nature of *mind*; and (b) their complete ignorance of its potentialities, and higher states, you have to admit that this objection is based on an *a priori* conclusion drawn from *prima*

¹ Plotinus: *Enneads* III, vi & IV, iii, *fn.* (tr. & note by Taylor)



facie and circumstantial evidence more than anything else. Now what is “memory” in your conception, pray?

ENQUIRER. That which is generally accepted: the faculty in our mind of remembering and of retaining the knowledge of previous thoughts, deeds and events.

THEOSOPHIST. Please add to it that there is a great difference between the three accepted forms of memory. Besides memory in general you have *Remembrance*, *Recollection* and *Reminiscence*, have you not? Have you ever thought over the difference? Memory, remember, is a generic name.

ENQUIRER. Yet, all these are only synonyms.

THEOSOPHIST. Indeed, they are not — not in philosophy, at all events. Memory is simply an innate power in thinking beings, and even in animals, of reproducing past impressions by an association of ideas principally suggested by objective things or by some action on our external sensory organs. Memory is a faculty depending entirely on the more or less healthy and normal functioning of our *physical* brain; and *remembrance* and *recollection* are the attributes and handmaidens of that memory. But *reminiscence* is an entirely different thing. “Reminiscence” is defined by the modern psychologist as something intermediate between *remembrance* and *recollection*, or “a conscious process of recalling past occurrences, but *without that full and varied reference* to particular things which characterises *recollection*.” Locke, speaking of recollection and remembrance, says: “When an *idea again* recurs without the operation of the like object on the external sensory, it is *remembrance*; if it be sought after by the mind, and with pain and endeavour found and brought again into view, it is *recollection*.” But even Locke leaves *reminiscence* without any clear definition, because it is no faculty or attribute of our *physical* memory, but an intuitional perception apart from and outside our physical brain; a perception which, covering as it does (being called into action by the ever-present knowledge of our spiritual Ego) all those visions in man which are regarded as *abnormal* — from the pictures suggested by genius to the *ravings* of fever and even madness — are classed by science as having no *existence* outside of our fancy. Occultism and Theosophy, however, regard *reminiscence* in an entirely different light. For us, while *memory* is physical and evanescent and depends on the physiological conditions of the brain — a fundamental proposition with all teachers of mnemonics, who have the researches of modern scientific psychologists to back them — we call *reminiscence* the *memory of the soul*. And it is *this* memory which gives the assurance to almost every human being, whether he understands it or not, of his having lived before and having to live again. Indeed, as Wordsworth has it:

“Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting,
The soul that rises with us, our life’s star,
Hath elsewhere had its setting,
And cometh from afar.”

ENQUIRER. If it is on this kind of memory — poetry and abnormal fancies, on your own confession — that you base your doctrine, then you will convince very few, I am afraid.



THEOSOPHIST. I did not “confess” it was a fancy. I simply said that physiologists and scientists in general regard such reminiscences as hallucinations and fancy, to which *learned* conclusion they are welcome. We do not deny that such visions of the past and glimpses far back into the corridors of time, are not abnormal, as contrasted with our normal daily life experience and physical memory. But we do maintain with Professor W. Knight, that “the absence of memory of any action done in a previous state cannot be a conclusive argument against our having lived through it.” And every fair-minded opponent must agree with what is said in Butler’s *Lectures on Platonic Philosophy* — “that the feeling of extravagance with which it (pre-existence) affects us has its secret source in materialistic or semi-materialistic prejudices.” Besides which we maintain that memory, as Olympiodorus called it, is simply *phantasy*, and the most unreliable thing in us.² Ammonius Saccas asserted that the only faculty in man directly opposed to prognostication, or looking into futurity, is *memory*. Furthermore, remember that memory is one thing and mind or *thought* is another; one is a recording machine, a register which very easily gets out of order; the other (thoughts) are eternal and imperishable. Would you refuse to believe in the existence of certain things or men only because your physical eyes have not seen them? Would not the collective testimony of past generations who have seen him be a sufficient guarantee that Julius Caesar once lived? Why should not the same testimony of the psychic senses of the masses be taken into consideration?

ENQUIRER. But don’t you think that these are too fine distinctions to be accepted by the majority of mortals?

THEOSOPHIST. Say rather by the majority of materialists. And to them we say, behold: even in the short span of ordinary existence, memory is too weak to register all the events of a lifetime. How frequently do even most important events lie dormant in our memory until awakened by some association of ideas, or aroused to function and activity by some other link. This is especially the case with people of advanced age, who are always found suffering from feebleness of recollection. When, therefore, we remember that which we know about the physical and the spiritual principles in man, it is not the fact that our memory has failed to record our precedent life and lives that ought to surprise us, but the contrary, were it to happen.³

Illustrations

Page 1: Memory by René Magritte

Page 5: Anticipation of a night’s shelter by Vladimir Kush

² “The phantasy,” says Olympiodorus (in *Platonis Phaed.*), “is an impediment to our intellectual conceptions; and hence, when we are agitated by the inspiring influence of the Divinity, if the phantasy intervenes, the enthusiastic energy ceases: for enthusiasm and the ecstasy are contrary to each other. Should it be asked whether the soul is able to energise without the phantasy, we reply, that its perception of universals proves that it is able. It has perceptions, therefore, independent of the phantasy; at the same time, however, the phantasy attends in its energies, just as a storm pursues him who sails on the sea.”

³ *Key to Theosophy*, (VII – ON RE-INCARNATION OR RE-BIRTH) pp. 123-27



Phantasy – Imagination is uncontrolled remembrance of past occurrences. It stifles enthusiasm.⁴

Student. — Is there not some attitude of mind which one should in truth assume in order to understand the occult in Nature?

Sage. — Such attitude of mind must be attained as will enable one to look into the realities of things. The mind must escape from the mere formalities and conventions of life, even though outwardly one seems to obey all of them, and should be firmly established on the truth that Man is a copy of the Universe and has in himself a portion of the Supreme Being. To the extent this is realized will be the clearness of perception of truth. A realization of this leads inevitably to the conclusion that all other men and beings are united with us, and this removes the egotism which is the result of the notion of separateness. When the truth of Unity is understood, then distinctions due to comparisons made like the Pharisee's, that one is better than his neighbor, disappear from the mind, leaving it more pure and free to act.

Student. — What would you point out as a principal foe to the mind's grasping of truth?

Sage. — The principal foe of a secondary nature is what was once called *phantasy*; that is, the reappearance of thoughts and images due to recollection or memory. Memory is an important power, but mind in itself is not memory. Mind is restless and wandering in its nature, and must be controlled. Its wandering disposition is necessary or stagnation would result. But it can be controlled and fixed upon an object or idea. Now as we are constantly looking at and hearing of new things, the natural restlessness of the mind becomes prominent when we set about pinning it down. Then memory of many objects, things, subjects, duties, persons, circumstances, and affairs brings up before it the various pictures and thoughts belonging to them. After these the mind at once tries to go, and we find ourselves wandering from the point. It must hence follow that the storing of a multiplicity of useless and surely-recurring thoughts is an obstacle to the acquirement of truth. And this obstacle is the very one peculiar to our present style of life.⁵

Ammonius Saccas, the “God-taught,” asserts that the only power which is directly opposed to soothsaying and looking into futurity is *memory*; and Olympiodorus calls it *phantasy*. “The phantasy,” he says “is an impediment to our intellectual conceptions; and hence, when we are agitated by the inspiring influence of the Divinity, if the phantasy intervenes, the enthusiastic energy ceases; for enthusiasm and the ecstasy are contrary to each other. Should it be asked whether the soul is able to energize without the phantasy, we reply, that its perception of universals proves that it is

⁴ Cf. [Plutarch quoting Plato on the etymology of enthusiasm, which is] . . . a kind of fury, partaking something of divine inspiration; neither it is engendered within, but is an insufflation from without, and a disturbance of the rational and considerative faculty, deriving its beginning and motion from some stronger power; the common affection of which is called the enthusiastic passion. For as *ἐμπνοος* signifies *filled with breath*, and *ἐμψρον* denotes *replete with prudence*; so this commotion of the soul is called enthusiasm (from *ἐνθεος*) by reason it participates of a more divine power. Now the prophetic part of enthusiasm derives itself from the inspiration of Apollo possessing the intellect of the soothsayer”; — Goodwin W.W., *et al.* (Tr. & Ed.). *Plutarch's Morals*, Vol. IV; Boston. Little, Brown & Co, 1878; [Of Love] 16, p. 279; (tr. Philips)

⁵ *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (CONVERSATIONS ON OCCULTISM, ADDITIONAL MATERIAL) IX pp. 400J-K



able. It has perceptions, therefore, independent of the phantasy; at the same time, however, the phantasy attends it in its energies, just as a storm pursues him who sails on the sea.”⁶

Reminiscence – Ανάμνησις

In *Meno*, Plato’s character (and old teacher) Socrates is challenged by Meno with what has become known as the sophistic paradox, or the paradox of knowledge:

Meno: And how are you going to search for [the nature of virtue] when you don’t know at all what it is, Socrates? Which of all the things you don’t know will you set up as target for your search? And even if you actually come across it, how will you know that it *is* that thing which you don’t know? (80b)

In other words, if you don’t know what the knowledge looks like, you won’t recognise it when you see it, and if you *do* know what it looks like, then you don’t need to look for it. Either way, then, there’s no point trying to gain knowledge.



Socrates’ response is to develop his theory of *anamnesis*. He suggests that the soul is immortal, being repeatedly incarnated; knowledge is actually in the soul from eternity (86b), but each time the soul is incarnated its knowledge is forgotten in the shock of birth. What we think of as learning, then is actually the bringing back of what we’d forgotten.

(Once it has been brought back it is true belief, to be turned into genuine knowledge by understanding.) And thus Socrates (and Plato) sees himself, not as a teacher, but as a midwife, aiding with the birth of knowledge that was already there in the student.

The theory is illustrated by Socrates asking a slave boy questions about geometry. At first the boy gives the wrong answer; when this is pointed out to him, he is puzzled, but by asking questions Socrates is able to help him to reach the true answer. This is intended to show that, as the boy wasn’t told the answer, he could only have reached the truth by recollecting what he had already known but forgotten.⁷

⁶ *Isis Unveiled*, II pp. 591-2; [quoting “Olympiodorus, *On the Phaedo of Plato*, in Thos. Taylor’s *Select Works of Porphyry*, p. 207, footnote.”]

⁷ After Wikipedia

